

Liza of Bourke's
and Other Stories.

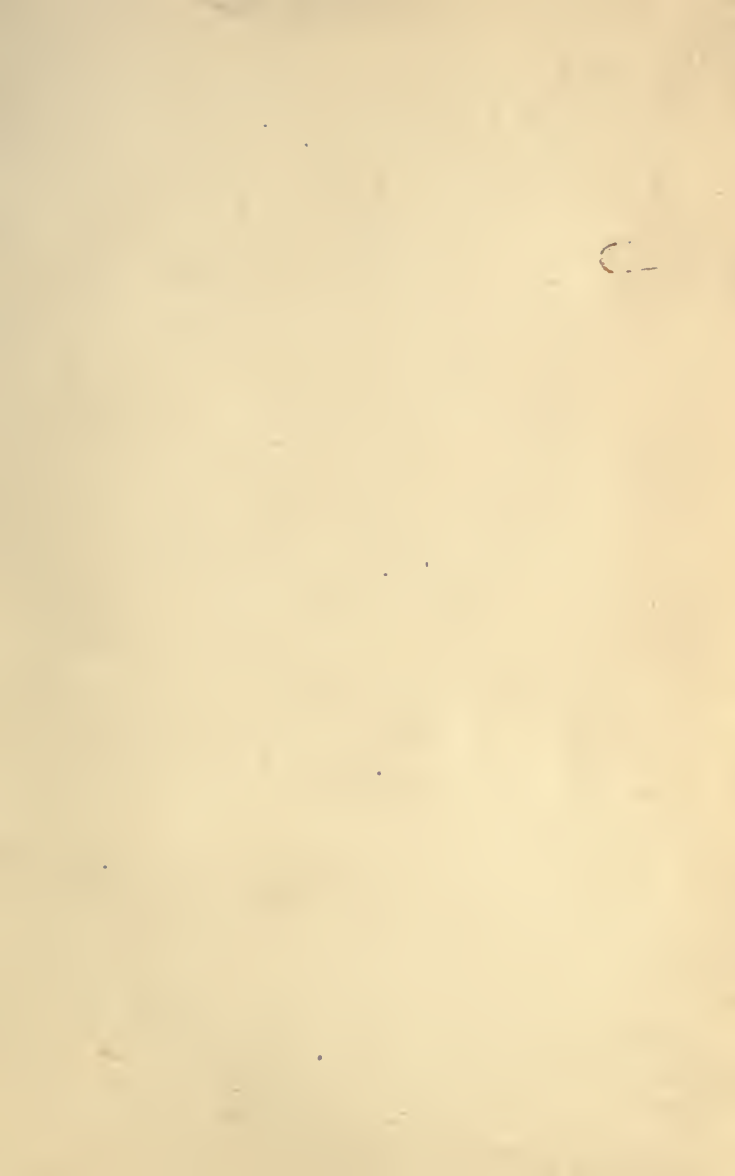
CYRIL VAILE.

Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2007 with funding from
Microsoft Corporation

\$4







LIZA OF BOURKE'S

AND OTHER STORIES

COPYRIGHT.

LIZA OF BOURKE'S

AND OTHER STORIES

By CYRIL VAILE

MELBOURNE:

D. W. PATERSON CO., PRINTERS AND PUBLISHERS,
487 COLLINS STREET.

MDCCCCVI.

PR
9619.3
V113L
1906

The following short stories made their first appearance in the Melbourne *Australasian*, *Leader*, *Herald*, and *Weekly Times*, New South Wales *Town and Country Journal*, and West Australian *Western Mail*; and I am indebted to the proprietors of those journals for permission to republish them in book form, in the hope that they will be found not without some interest to the general public as true pictures of a life by one who has lived with those about whom he writes.

CYRIL VAILE.

Hawthorn,
November, 1906.

DEDICATED
TO
THE MEMORY
OF
MY MOTHER.



CONTENTS.

	PAGE
In Our Garden	1
Boy Jack	6
Liza of Bourke's	12
What Liza Did	18
Liza's Boy	28
The Passing of Liza	39
Lonely Bill's Mate	49
His Little Maid's Fortune	65
The Little Maid's Find	77
Old Ned's Account	91
Told by Mistake	103
A Bush Hezekiah	115
His Little Friend	128
The End of the Road	137
The Little Foreigner	148
A Near Thing	160
My Uncle Smith	171
The Fatal Book	178
His Own Doing	189
The Way of His Wooing	204
His Promise	216
Her Christmas Holiday	223
How He Found the King	233
For His Friend's Sake	248



IN OUR GARDEN

IN the garden are many trees and bushes, through which the sunlight falls in broad patches on the green grass beneath, speckled here and there with white clover. Outside is the broad, dusty, white road, baking hot in the full glare of a summer sun, but inside it is cool and shady; the weeping willows wave their long arms gently in the breeze, which makes a mournful sighing in the pines. And here the bees' drowsy hum sounds as they fly from flower to flower, in an apparently aimless fashion, but always with one purpose in view. The cicada, hidden away in the thick greenery, sings his monotonous song, which vibrates through the hot air. His energy never seems to suffer diminution from the heat. The hotter the day the more persistent and penetrating is his rattle, until one longs for even an instant's silence. At last he ceases, and grateful silence ensues, save for the low coo-coo of the doves, which comes pleasantly from the coolest and shadiest corner of the garden.

Here in this sheltered corner, over-shadowed by tall pines and fragrant pepper trees, is the bath, into which all day long the water slowly drips from a tap above; and here come all the birds to bathe and feed, and discuss their affairs. The ground about is damp, an excellent place for worms and snails and smaller fry; in fact,

all the heart of bird can desire. But the bath is the chief attraction.

When dawn slowly begins to brighten in the east, with the first faint streaks of day, the bird world begins to awake. First, a low call from the depths of a pine tree, answered faintly from here and there until presently one more enterprising than the rest flies to the top of the highest tree, and pours forth a flood of melody on the fresh morning air. Soon they are all awake, and with cheerful chirpings begin to gather about the bath. There is a table of precedence here, very strictly adhered to, and woe betide the pert sparrow who ventures to perform his ablutions before his betters have had their turn; he will be quickly driven off with pecks and much flap-pings of wings, accompanied by a loud chorus of disapprobation from those whom he has dared to supersede.

First come the minahs, mostly, one thinks, by right of numbers and impudence, backed up by a great show of importance and judicious bullying of the smaller birds. Loud-voiced, rumbustious fellows these, regular swash-bucklers, insisting on what they consider their rights, and prepared to back them with force, if the odds are not too great. The rest are a peace-loving community, and so, as in the greater world outside, bullying and assurance get somewhat the best of it.

Next in order come the blackbirds. Polished gentlemen and ladies these every one of them. They know what is due to themselves, but are not given to proclaiming it to all and sundry in a loud voice. They understand "*noblesse oblige*," and practise it, and so their place is readily conceded them without loud assertion on their part. One fancies they might dispute the right of first place with their self-assertive neighbours, the minahs, and not come off second best; but they seem to prefer

"peace with honour," and wait in a dignified way until the bath is disengaged. Then how they enjoy themselves! What a ducking of heads, flapping of wings, and splashing of water in all directions, until at last they fly off, and preen their black satin coats in the sun. But this is not their only bath for the day. At all hours you may see them sporting in the water. The coldest day does not appal them, and they always do it with such an appearance of enjoyment that one fancies them saying—as they put back their tiny heads, after taking a drink, and gaze up with their sharp, bright eyes—"Thank God for plenty of cold water to wash in." Regular aristocrats they are, never forgetting what is due to themselves, but remembering other people also have rights, and respecting them. They would disdain to snatch the food from smaller birds, and are a very conservative class altogether.

Next in order come the thrushes. They are busy fellows, and seem to grudge the time for washing themselves. It is more duty than pleasure with them. If you would see one happy watch him until he finds a snail, then he is in his element. Carrying it to a gravel path he will dash it down with all his strength, again and again, while you hear the poor snail's shell crack, crack every time. They are rather too fond of the pleasures of the table, occasionally swallowing more than their internal economy can find room for, and then they must remain somewhat uncomfortable until digestion creates a much-needed vacuum. Still they are busy fellows, and in the nesting season pay no attention to the Eight Hours' Bill; and, of course, those who work hard must eat much.

After this come the sparrows—an unnumbered band. Such a twittering and pecking at one another for first

place. Might is right with them, and, indeed, amongst such a number one can hardly blame them. If it was—"After you, madam!" "When you have finished, sir!"—they would never get done before the minahs came down again, and drove them off. They quarrel sadly over their food; but as there is plenty of it that doesn't much matter, and with a little patience they all get enough.

Next comes the wren, with his wife and family of three. He is a very gay-looking fellow, with bright blue facings to his coat. His tail, too, is something to wonder at, but, as his wife and daughters have similar ones, he does not value it so highly. But, notwithstanding his conceit, he is a good husband and father, and they all appear to be much attached to one another, for one never sees them apart. They are the most lively little fellows in existence, never for one moment still, and their tails give one some faint idea of what perpetual motion must be like. With three daughters and a wife, the cock-bird's time is fully occupied, and, at times, one imagines he must be rather anxious about their future, and cast an eye about in search of possible suitors for those three daughters of his.

Later on in the day come the doves. There are only two of them—husband and wife—but they are a very attached couple; in fact, a model for all other birds to emulate. They waddle—there is no other word for it—along together, seldom more than a couple of yards apart. They prefer their own society to that of other birds, but are not averse to human beings, and will feed close around your chair if you are sitting in the garden, and gaze at you now and then in the sure confidence that you will not hurt them. They are not fond of bathing until the day is well advanced; perhaps, because it must need a very warm sun to dry that thick coat of feathers

if it once gets thoroughly wet. They are reflective birds, and often sit together on a garden seat for a long time without uttering a coo.

Occasionally, a stray magpie puts in an appearance, and stays for a short time, but he must not be counted amongst the regular inhabitants of the garden. The field is too circumscribed for him, and when he takes his departure the others do not seem to feel his loss.

Lastly, when the summer is gone, and most of the trees are bare, comes the robin red-breast, hopping cheerfully here and there, making a bright spot of colour in the now somewhat dreary garden. He is a cheerful little fellow, and makes the best of the bleak weather. The bath has few attractions for him, save to get a drink, but he seems grateful for the crumbs scattered on the gravel path. It is too cold to sit in the garden, so you watch him from behind the glass of your window. He is such a natty little fellow, with his bright crimson waistcoat so spotlessly clean, and he serves to remind us on the dull days that summer will come again, and the song of birds once more resound in the trees and bushes of the garden.

BOY JACK

HE was the pride and pet of all the diggers at Black Gully, and reigned undisputed monarch of the camp. Not one of the men but would have cheerfully put himself to any amount of trouble to oblige the child, and counted himself the gainer by the transaction. And gradually boy Jack began to understand that this was the case, and in time became somewhat imperious in the manner of issuing his demands. Nevertheless, they were always cheerfully complied with, for since the day when boy Jack's father had levanted from the Black Gully diggings, and gone to seek gold elsewhere, displaying a truly unbounded trust in Providence by leaving his son to make a home for himself as best he might, every digger in the gully had looked upon the child as his separate and particular charge. True it was the Dutchman who had found him sitting alone by the creek, and had taken him home to his hut, but in many ways the other men shared their interest in the little chap, and exhibited an anxiety to earn his love and gratitude that would have been ludicrous had it not been so entirely human.

They were a hard, rough set of men these searchers for gold out in the wild, hilly country. Of all nationalities, ready with a word and a blow, and yet ever willing

to give a helping hand to a mate in distress. It was a hard, lonely life they led, without one single softening or refining influence. Womankind there were none nearer than the township, some twenty miles off, and thither the men occasionally went for the combined purposes of a grand "bust up" and to get provisions for the camp.

They were a strangely assorted pair, the Dutchman and boy Jack. The former, big, rough and shaggy, but with a kind heart hidden beneath his rough exterior, and the little boy with his innocent, childish face and great round eyes, which used to open to their widest extent when his adopted parent began to swear. And this used to happen pretty often, for the Dutchman was not in the habit of controlling his feelings when put out, and at such times would give vent to a string of oaths and curses calculated to make the hair of even his hardened hearers stand on end. Not that any of the men were very particular as to the language they used, but the Dutchman was on all hands acknowledged to be a regular out and outer. Boy Jack used to stand by quietly at such times, listening intently, and one day somewhat astonished his hearers by rapping out a string of the Dutchman's favourite oaths. There was a great roar of laughter from the men present, until a digger, who went by the name of Old Ned, remarked—

"Seems to me, mates, there arn't much to laugh at in hearing a nipper swear. Bad enough in us, I reckon."

Nobody replied, for the men were all more or less ashamed of themselves, and presently dispersed in silence. This had happened when boy Jack was seven, and for a little while, mindful of Old Ned's words, the diggers were more careful of their language in the child's presence. But only for a little while, and then it was forgotten and the swearing went on as usual.

Boy Jack was entirely master of his own time, and roamed about amongst the men or went off on expeditions into the bush, accompanied only by his dog, a lop-eared cur with one blind eye. Education he got none, save a curious warped idea of religion, picked up no one knew how; but he could play euchre with any man, for the Dutchman had taught him, and in this way they passed the long winter evenings in the hut, sometimes alone and at other times in the company of any of the men who cared to drop in after the day's work was over.

So boy Jack's life went on until he was ten. He could neither read nor write, but his small brain was full of a curious knowledge of men and things, and his habit of swearing had grown until even the Dutchman was forced to admit that he was outdistanced. Old Ned had never reproved the men again for laughing at this, and so the child grew to consider it a fine accomplishment, and indulged in it freely. It was a strange life for him to lead, subject to no restraint, and with only the most rudimentary ideas of right and wrong. Love he had of a sort, for all the men worshipped him, but what he lacked most was the guiding and controlling hand of a good woman.

But one day he fell sick; he who had never known what it was to have an ache or pain was forced to remain in his bunk in the corner of the hut, tossing from side to side feverishly. The Dutchman scratched his head, cursed under his breath, and then went off to consult Old Ned. In due time Ned appeared, and after looking at the child for a minute, pronounced his ailment as a fever, and said he must be kept warm. With wonderful tenderness the Dutchman nursed him through that day, but on the next he was worse. When the news got round the camp that boy Jack was ill, every digger was eager in his offers of assistance, and the Dutchman's hut was fairly besieged

by them all, anxious to be of help. But old Ned, as chief physician, sent them off, and did most of the nursing himself. But it was of a rough and ready sort, and no suitable medicines being obtainable, the child grew rapidly worse. When this was known, heavy gloom settled down on the camp, and the men seemed disinclined to work. Pick, shovel, and dish were laid by, and the diggers collected into groups at the different huts and talked of the child. One and all loved him dearly, and the thought that he was ill made them lower their voices and cease their usual rough jokes, even when out of earshot of the hut.

Inside, boy Jack lay on his bunk, tossing from side to side, while the Dutchman sat close by, watching. His rough, hard face had a very tender look while gazing at the child, who moaned from time to time, as if in pain. Presently Old Ned appeared, and, approaching the bunk, laid his hard, rough hand on the little fellow's forehead.

"The boys are waiting about outside," he said, turning to the other. "They want to come in." The Dutchman grunted, but did not move.

Presently came a knock, and then the door was quietly opened, disclosing about a dozen men patiently waiting to be admitted. One by one they entered, and walking over to the bunk gazed down at the sick child, and then quietly retired. All this time the Dutchman never moved, and the silence was unbroken save for boy Jack's occasional moans. That night he grew rapidly worse, and in the morning was delirious. The news went round the camp, and no one thought of going to work; but one and all, as if drawn there by some power they could not resist, gathered about the hut inside of which the sick-boy lay.

Presently the door opened, and Old Ned came out. "Mates," he said, in a husky voice, "the little chap's going." A low murmur went round, but the old man's hand was raised for silence. "We've all loved 'im," he went on, "and the Dutchman thought as 'ow you'd like to see 'im once more before ——," and here his voice faltered.

"We understand," came the ready response.

"'E won't know yer," the old man continued, opening the door of the hut. "Poor little chap, 'e's off 'is head."

With a strange, awed look on their faces, the men entered, and gazed at the dying child. He was lying in a bunk, flushed and feverish, and muttering words and sentences in his delirium. The Dutchman sat close by, watching him with an awful, hungry intensity. For a minute or two no one spoke, and then the men turned to go. But ere the first one reached the door a shrill voice rang out, which startled them. Boy Jack had half risen in his bunk, and with a wild look in his eyes was crying out. For a moment no one understood, and then, as the first shock wore off, they shuddered. The dying boy was cursing and swearing as they had so often heard him do, and only laughed at him for. But now it was all so different, and the hardest of them shuddered and hid his face in his hands as the horrid words dropped from the child's lips. No one moved to stop him, for they seemed incapable of action, and could only listen shudderingly as the childish lips uttered the foul words learned from the men who stood around. That was the horror, and as each man heard his own curses, as it were, echoed by the boy, he clasped his hands in the effort to control himself till the finger nails dug into the flesh. And then in a moment it was over, and boy Jack fell back in his bunk calm and still.

Old Ned bent over him, and then drew back quietly.

"It's all over, mates," he said, and turned away. No one else moved. The sound of the childish voice uttering curses still rang in their ears, but the boy was dead. They looked at one another uncertain what to do, until once more old Ned spoke: "Mates," he said "let's pray."

Every man there went down on his knees save the Dutchman, who had never moved, and old Ned prayed.

"Oh God," he said, "we are a rough lot of men, not much used to making prayers, but we want to ask you to forgive the little chap 'ere for what 'as 'appened. You know, God, 'e didn't know no better, and it was we as taught 'im 'ow to curse and swear, and 'e never knew as there was any harm in it. If you are angry, God, be only angry with us, for it was all our fault. Blarst us if you like, but let the little chap alone."

And then every man in the hut said Amen—it seemed to be the proper ending for a prayer—and rose from his knees, and went out, leaving old Ned and the Dutchman alone with their dead.

They buried him next day, old Ned reading the burial service from a little ragged prayer book which had lain unused in his pack for years, while all the diggers stood by to pay their last respects to boy Jack.

Then the men went back to pick, shovel, and cradle once more, for work must go on; but for many days no sound of cursing was heard in Black Gully.

LIZA OF BOURKE'S

SHE was about six feet high, scaled over twelve stone, and possessed a hand and arm that would not have disgraced a champion strong man. Had she been asked her age she would probably have said about thirty, for there was no desire in Liza to make herself appear younger than she was. But no one ever thought of asking about her age, she was just Liza of Bourke's, and that was all. Other name she had none, or if she had ever possessed one, nobody in the locality of Bourke's had ever heard of it.

Bourke's was nominally a general store, situated in the bush some twenty miles from the nearest township. But dry goods were only an item in its business. A large part of the trade consisted in purchasing gold from the diggers in the country round, who flocked into the store on Saturday afternoons for the purpose of selling their week's findings and obtaining provisions for the next six or seven days. In addition to this, strong drink could be obtained and consumed on the premises by those who chose to pay for it, and these were not a few, consequently Bourke's generally presented a somewhat lively appearance at least once in the week. No one ever bothered to ask if Bourke's possessed a license, because no one cared, and there was little probability of the

strong arm of the law intervening, the mounted constable of the district having more important matters on hand than an attempt to put down a trade which he knew would be resumed so soon as his back was turned. So Bourke's followed its own sweet will unhampered by any restrictions, and Liza ruled over the place with an iron hand.

The diggers looked upon her as one of themselves, never moderating their language or the subject of their conversation before her, and in every respect treated her as a man. And this was scarcely to be wondered at. In the intervals of serving in the store, she chopped wood, milked the cows, cultivated a small piece of land, and generally did a man's work.

The proprietor of Bourke's, from whom it derived its name, was an old man, crippled with rheumatism, and the sole part he took in the business was to weigh and purchase the gold brought in by the diggers. Everything else fell on Liza's broad shoulders.

More than once it had been her lot to act as "chucker out" when some digger, having taken more than was good for him, became too rowdy even for Bourke's; and each time she had performed the task in a way that earned her the respect of every man present.

They were a rough, mixed collection of men about the diggings, fossicking in a wild, hilly country for a precarious livelihood, and their only enjoyment was the sort of weekly reunion at Bourke's. There, when their gold was turned into coin of the realm, Liza was kept busy serving out provisions and drinks, while conversation, freely interlarded with oaths of a hair-raising character, was kept up.

It was Saturday afternoon, and the store was crowded with diggers, seated on cases, barrels, and anything that

came handy. All were talking, many drinking, and the atmosphere was thick with blasphemy and smoke combined.

Liza's voice was heard above the rest, addressing a burly ruffian who was leaning against the counter close by her.

"It's no use, Joe Cairns," she said, "your score is a darned sight too long already. You'll have to pay something off it or go elsewhere for your goods."

"Curse it all, Liza!" replied the man; "I've had no luck lately. Don't be too damned hard on a bloke down on his luck."

"You're lazy, and have got no stomach for work; that's what the matter," answered Liza, moving to serve the next man.

Joe Cairns scowled, and moved down the room to have drinks at someone else's expense, while Liza's voice was again raised in argument about the amount of another man's score.

"Give it to 'im, Liza!" shouted a couple of men, but she paid no heed to them, for she was indifferent to their encouragement or otherwise.

Presently a newcomer entered the store, and stood waiting patiently somewhat apart from the others for his turn to be served. He was very different from the other men present. In the first place he was very young, scarcely more than eighteen, and in contrast to the rough-bearded faces about him he looked boyish, and somewhat ill able to take care of himself. There was a look in his face that would have told a keen observer that he did not always get enough to eat, and his figure and hands looked strangely unfit for the life he was leading.

For some minutes he stood quite still, speaking to no

one, until Liza caught sight of him and beckoned him across the room.

"What do you want, Bob?" she asked in a somewhat lower voice than usual, and there was a different, almost sympathetic, look in her eyes as she addressed the boy. She had seen him in the store before, and easily guessed he was new to the life, and her womanly heart went out to him; he looked so lonely and unfitted to battle out this hard life unaided.

"I think a couple of loaves will do me to-day," he answered in a low voice.

"Nonsense!" answered Liza. "I've got a nice piece of salt beef that will just suit you."

"But I can't pay for it," answered the boy. "I only got eighteenpence worth this week."

"Never mind about the money" was the answer. "You can't work with only bread to eat. You must have some meat to give you strength. You can pay when you have a bit of luck, and needn't pay at all if you don't want to."

The boy protested feebly, but, disregarding him, Liza said, "I'll go and fetch it for you," and left the room.

Joe Cairns, who had been enjoying hospitality at the other end of the room, had approached in time to hear the end of this conversation, and with an evil, tipsy smile advanced to within a couple of feet of the lad, and addressed him—

"So you can lick round Liza and get food for nothing, you white-faced young cur!" he exclaimed, in a voice made furious by anger and drink.

The boy started. "I lick round no one," he answered proudly. "I'll pay it back when I earn the money."

"Pay back be damned!" roared the man. "Liza won't trust me because I don't snivel and haven't got a white face."

"You lie! I didn't snivel!" cried the boy, flushing.

"Lie, do I?" answered Cairns, now beside himself, and stepping forward he delivered a terrific blow, stretching the young fellow senseless on the floor.

Just at this moment Liza re-entered the store, carrying the piece of meat. In a moment she realised what had occurred, and with a quick movement had vaulted the counter and was kneeling by the stunned boy, who was bleeding from a cut in his forehead. Before anyone could move to help her she had lifted him up in her strong arms and carried him across the store and into a room close by, where she laid him down and proceeded to bathe his head.

Outside in the store a babel of voices was raised. Everyone was excited, not because a man had been knocked down and stunned—that was a common occurrence—but on account of Liza's action. Such things had happened in her presence before, and she had paid no heed to them. They could not understand it.

Presently the voices ceased as Liza re-entered, and the men waited to see what would happen next. She strode up to Cairns, and stood over him with flashing eyes.

"Joe Cairns!" she said, in her rough, loud voice, which was scarcely so firm as usual, "you are a damned, lazy, cowardly bully for striking that poor boy. Never show your face inside Bourke's again, or I'll put the dogs on you, as sure as you're the meanest cur that ever defiled the face of God's earth."

Every man stood as if spellbound at the fury with which the words were uttered. But more was to come. Raising her hand with the quickness of thought, Liza clenched her fist and struck Cairns full on the mouth, so strong and true a blow that, big man as he was, he staggered and fell.

Then another wonder happened, for Liza sank on to a case, and, hiding her face in her hands, burst into tears.

The men stood speechless, until one old digger muttered, "Good God! I never knowed it! She's a woman, after all. We're sorry, Liza," he went on, approaching her, but she did not seem to hear, and after waiting a moment longer the men shuffled out of the place one by one in a shamefaced way, leaving Liza of Bourke's alone.

WHAT LIZA DID.

IT was a lonely life that Liza of Bourke's led. True there was plenty of companionship of a sort, but it was hardly likely to be satisfying to a woman even if she were plain and thirty years old, to say nothing of her possessing a figure that for size and strength would not have disgraced the burliest digger fossicking in the gullies and creeks of the district round about Bourke's. Most days in the week Liza had plenty to do in looking after the store. True, Saturday was the busiest day, for then the miners came to sell their gold and perhaps get a week's supply of food; but at almost all hours of every day there would be one or two of them sitting on kerosene cases in the store or lounging under the iron-roofed verandah, swapping yarns or slowly smoking in meditative silence.

In all things, except buying the gold, Liza's will was supreme. She regulated the amount of each man's score, and from her decision there was no appeal; and so, in spite of the fact that she bandied talk with the men in a free and easy manner, and never exacted any consideration from them merely on account of her sex, she was obeyed in all things with a submission that physical force could never have commanded. The softer side of her nature was kept carefully in the background. On one

occasion it had shown itself, and the men had stared, and wondered, and gradually forgotten; all save one, who had felt the weight of her fist. And Liza, ashamed of this one outburst, had been careful to avoid the like happening again. And yet in spite of this and the rough unfeminine conditions of her life, she was a very woman at heart. Circumstances had made her exterior rough and hard, but could not quite kill the gentle feelings that lay hidden beneath. And so, though no one ever guessed it, Liza often longed for the companionship of one of her own sex, and in secret sighed for some other interest in life besides selling meat, flour, sugar, tea, and, on occasions, strong drink, to the rough men who made Bourke's store a sort of general meeting place.

About once a month she drove the waggon into the nearest township, some twenty miles off, to bring out new provisions for the store; and occasionally, very occasionally, stayed one night, never more, for old Bourke was a regular nigger driver, and grumbled immoderately at what he called the "damned waste of time" on these occasions. Autocratic with everyone else, Liza generally submitted to the old man's will and obeyed him. Why, nobody could tell. Perhaps she pitied his helplessness, for old Bourke was a martyr to rheumatism. Perhaps there was some other reason. No one could say for certain, though some hinted that they were father and daughter; and one, Joe Cairns, when he had rather more drink on board than was good for him, had openly stated that a much less creditable connection than that was the real reason of Liza's living alone with the old man at the store. The assembled diggers had received this statement in silence. One or two growled something inaudible, and several of them spat with emphasis, but no one spoke for a minute,

and then old Ned slowly knocked the ashes out of his pipe, and delivered himself thus :

“ Joe Cairns, you lie ; and all of us here knows it. You know it yourself. Liza’s a good girl, if a bit free with her tongue at times. She treats us all fair, and I say damn the man who tries to take away her clean name behind her back. What do you say, mates ? ”

“ That’s so. Ned’s right,” said the Dutchman, and the others growled an assent emphatic enough to show Cairns that Liza had plenty of sturdy supporters to protect her fair name.

The monthly visit to the township was an event Liza looked forward to with interest, for it afforded the one and only chance in her life of obtaining a little female society. No matter how hurried the trip was, she always found an hour to spare, which she spent with her friend Minnie Searle, the local blacksmith’s daughter. The two friends afforded a striking contrast physically and mentally, for Minnie was small and dark, with a mouth that seemed made for laughter and kisses. By nature she was soft and gentle, always needing a stronger nature to lean upon, and this helped to endear her with Liza, who, on the rare occasions when they were together, mothered her to her heart’s content.

One morning she harnessed the horses into the waggon and started off for the township earlier than usual. It meant an early start at any time if she meant to return the same day, but on this day in particular it was scarcely light on a January morning when the waggon rumbled out of the store yard and down the bush track, leaving a thick trail of dust behind it, which hung a long while in the still morning air. There was a light of purpose in Liza’s eyes as she sat in front and called cheerfully to the horses, who, flicking their tails in an endeavour to

keep off the swarm of flies, responded cheerfully to her call, and rattled the waggon away over ruts and stumps until the ancient vehicle seemed likely to collapse at any moment, and leave nothing but a heap of ruins in the middle of the road. However, it held together bravely, and by 10 o'clock Liza pulled up outside the blacksmith's, and shouted for Minnie. The blacksmith came out in answer to her call.

"Well, Liza! How goes it?" he asked. "Not seen you for an age. The missus and Minnie was saying only last night that the old man keeps a mighty close hand on ye."

"There's always plenty to do at Bourke's," answered Liza. "I want to take Minnie back with me to-day, if you will let her come. An old promise of yours, remember."

"What's the old man say?" asked the blacksmith, leaning his elbows on the side of the waggon.

"Well, he weren't best pleased," answered Liza, truthfully. "But I told him straight if he wouldn't have her come I'd leave."

"He gave in, then, I'll stáke my oath!" said the other chuckling. "Well, you see the missus. She's boss here."

Liza saw the missus, and when the waggon drove out of the township that afternoon Minnie was seated in the front of it alongside her friend. Old Bourke was sitting on the verandah when they arrived at the store, but did not offer any welcome to the guest unless a low growl and a very emphatic spit into the dust at his feet could be construed as such.

Liza had told the "boys" of Minnie's coming, and warned them under pain of her displeasure that they must refrain from swearing in the girl's presence. They rolled up in force to see Liza's friend, and in a little while the

girl had made friends with many of them, and helped Liza to serve out the tea, sugar, flour, and other supplies.

The visit was to have been for a fortnight only, but the days sped by. Minnie seemed perfectly happy, and made no mention of terminating her stay. Liza was happy, too, and as old Bourke made no objection, the visit was prolonged for a couple of months, until one day the blacksmith put in an appearance and claimed his daughter. Minnie pleaded with what seemed unnecessary vehemence for a few more days, and Liza seconded her. But Searle was firm, and finally Minnie departed amidst floods of tears, while Liza stood on the verandah and watched them drive away down the dusty track. They passed out of sight behind a belt of timber, but still she did not move until a voice behind her said—

“Where’s your friend, Liza?”

The speaker was a young, good-looking digger, known as “Beauty Bob,” and he had latterly spent much of his time at the store in spite of very strong hints from Liza that he would be better at work. She turned and walked past him into the store.

“Grass must be growin’ fine on your claim, Bob,” she said.

The man had followed her and seated himself comfortably on an upturned case before he replied.

“Fair, Liza! Fair.”

“Do you want anything?”

“Can’t say I do,” answered Bob, beating his heels against the case reflectively.

“Well, then, clear out. I’m going to clean up the store, and you’re in the road.”

The man started in surprise. Liza was generally ready for a pitch at all times. But she meant it, and he ad-

journed to the outside, while she tried to salve her sore heart by vigorously tidying up the store room.

Autumn and winter came and went occupied in the usual way. Minnie's visit was a thing of long ago. She had not been at home when Liza last called, and before the time for the next visit came Liza had heard a sad tale. One spring afternoon Searle had galloped up to the store, asked for Minnie, and learning she was not there told Liza all he knew. It was not much. Only the old story of a loving girl, too confiding, giving all on trust, and then left to bear her trouble alone. Only three days before she had told them all but the man's name, and that same night she had disappeared.

"Why?" asked Liza.

"I said some hard things to her, God forgive me for it, Liza," answered the blacksmith. "And the poor child feared me."

She made no reply, and after waiting for a minute the man went on—

"You'll let us know if she comes here, Liza. The missus is sure she will, for there's nowhere else she can go."

"I'll send one of the boys," she answered, and Searle rode back again to the township. A few hours later Minnie dragged her weary form to the store, and even as she raised her hand to knock, Liza was there, and lifting the girl in her strong arms carried her into her own room. With wonderful tenderness those strong hands administered to the sufferer, and when at last all was done that could be done, Liza bent down and said—

"Minnie, you must tell me his name."

"No, no! Liza, I can't!" But presently she did, and with a stern look in her eyes Liza rose up.

"I must leave you for an hour. Bear up till then, my

girl;" but Minnie only hid her face and cried, while Liza was striding fast along the track that led to one of the camps. Presently she reached a hut. "Jack!" she called, and a young fellow appeared in the doorway. "You must go over to Searle's and tell them to come over at once. You can have Toby to ride. There's no saddle, but you must get along without it. Be sure you tell them to hurry. There's no time to be lost."

Jack stared for a moment, then, "Right, oh, Liza! Is that all!"

"Yes; that's all! Only for God's sake hurry!"

"Ain't you coming back to the store now?" he asked. But Liza never heard. She had other work to do, and was again striding away along the track.

In five minutes more she was outside the Dutchman's hut. He and old Ned had lived together since the death of boy Jack.

"Ned!" she said, between gasps, for she was out of breath, "I want you and the Dutchy to go up to the store at once, and wait for me there, if it's all night. Take that prayer-book of yours along with you," and she was striding away again, with the hardest part of her task before her.

"Beauty Bob's" hut lay some little way off the track she had been following, but she knew its situation well, and it was there she was bound now. Bob was eating his tea when she arrived, and stared up in amazement. "Why, Liza——?" he began.

"Shut your blarsted mouth, and listen to what I have to say," began Liza, with an outburst that made Bob stare wider than before, accompanied by so fierce a look, as of some angry lioness robbed of her cubs, that he thought it well to listen in silence.

"You must come along with me at once to the store,

and do what I tell you, or I won't answer for the result. Minnie's there."

The young man's jaw fell. He had not expected this of all things. He had reckoned his secret safe.

"And what if I won't come?" he asked.

"Won't come!" cried Liza, and her eyes fairly blazed. "Then old Dinny shall hear what became of his 2-oz. speck, and you can guess he won't be pleased, and what he and the boys will do if I tell them."

The man cowered visibly at the threat.

"What do you want of me at the store?" he asked.

"You'll know when you get there," she answered. "And, by God, if you don't come at once I'll get some of the boys to drag you there."

"I'll come," he answered, now thoroughly cowed by her fierce manner and the threats he well knew she would put into execution if need be. "There's no need to talk about what you'll do."

"Mooch along then," said Liza, paying no attention to the latter part of this last remark. "You go in front, and don't try to give me the slip, that's all."

Half an hour later they arrived at the store to find old Ned and the Dutchman sitting on a log smoking in silence, and contentedly waiting for Liza to turn up and explain why she required their presence. They stared for a moment on seeing Bob, but made no comment beyond greeting him with a nod, and then followed into the store, where Liza was already lighting a kerosene lamp, for it was almost dark. They sat on cases, and watched her. "Bourke's away," she said briefly, and passed into a room opening off the store. Presently she returned, and after closing the door carefully behind her, said—

"Did you bring that prayer-book of yours, Ned?"

"Yes, my girl. Here 'tis!" he answered, bringing it slowly from his pocket. It had evidently seen much wear and tear, and Liza eyed it somewhat distrustfully.

"Is it all there?" she asked, anxiously.

"All but a bit of 'duty towards my neighbour'," slapping it with his great horny hand. "It ain't been used since I read the service over boy Jack."

The Dutchman spat, and kicked over the case he had been sitting on, for his heart was still very tender towards his adopted son.

"Hush!" said Liza at the noise. "She's in there. Dying I'm afraid!"

"Who?" said Ned. The Dutchman seldom spoke.

"Minnie! She came this afternoon. I've sent Jack for her people, but I'm afraid they will be too late."

"Dying! Why?"

"That's why," Liza said, nodding towards "Beauty Bob," who all this while had sat silent, somewhat behind the others. Ned and the Dutchman stared, only half understanding, but said nothing. "Come," she went on, moving towards the door, "There's no time to waste."

They rose to follow, but Ned interrupted her at the door. "But what's this for, Liza?" he asked, holding out the prayer-book towards her. She took it, and after much fumbling found a certain place and handed it back.

"I don't know as it's much use, Ned, or if God Almighty will pay any attention to it, but I want you to marry these two as fast as you can. Bob's sorry for what he has done, and is willin', and it will comfort Minnie and do no harm to the baby that's to come. If she lives we can have it done proper by a parson later on, but this must do for the present. Come in now, but don't make a row."

They shuffled silently into the room where Minnie

lay on the rough bed, almost too ill to move. The weary miles of wandering since she had left her home had worn her out, and now she lay pale and exhausted. But, weak as she was, her eyes lighted up gladly at the sight of Bob. For a moment he stared at her, and then moved forward and fell on his knees beside her. She raised one hand and stroked his head softly, while the man's body shook with hard, dry sobs. Here, in face of the mischief he had wrought, his better nature came to the front, and he repented. And then presently old Ned began to read the marriage service. From "Dearly beloved, we are gathered together——" down to "amazement," stumbling here and there, for his eyes were weak and the light bad, but getting through it for all that. And so this strange marriage was performed, while Liza stood by, like some high priestess, and when it was all over she, Ned, and the Dutchman retired into the store for a little time, leaving the new made husband and wife alone.

"It was all I could do, Ned," she said, in a moment of confidence. "It was my fault for not taking more care of her when she was here. But somehow I think they'll understand up above and make it all right."

Through the long hours of the night Liza watched by the girl's side, ministering to her with a great tenderness that had to make up for much lack of skill; while Bob paced up and down outside, bitterly repentant. And with the first rays of the rising sun the girl died, leaving behind her a young life cradled in Liza's arms.

LIZA'S BOY

HE was always called Liza's Boy, even from the very beginning, and surely no one lived who had a better right to own him than Liza of Bourke's, who, big and rough in so many things, was so very gentle and tender with this small atom of humanity whom she could have crushed easily with one of her huge hands, but which instead ministered so patiently and with such wonderful love to all his numerous wants and requirements. Those hands, too, had helped to bring him into this world, and had gently closed his mother's eyes, when, worn out with suffering, she had given up the painful business of living and passed away to another world as the sun was rising one fair spring morning, leaving behind her this baby son lying in a cradle improvised out of a kerosene case, all unconscious of his great loss. And from that moment Liza had taken up the duties of motherhood, and in spite of many disabilities had fulfilled them as only a loving woman can.

At first there had been much doubt as to who was to have charge of the baby. The blacksmith Searle and his wife had been willing, nay, even anxious, to take their small grandchild, who, although not born in lawful wedlock, they already loved for his dead mother's sake. But Liza had begged so hard to be allowed to keep him, and

her right to consideration was so undoubted, that when "Beauty Bob," his father, had said, "Let Liza keep the boy," the Searles had consented and gone home alone; and when some few months later Searle had sold his business and left the district, Liza felt happy in the undisputed possession of the child.

Bourke's store was surely a strange nursery for a baby, and yet he throve well in it; and in spite of all her other duties, Liza found time to give him all the attention he needed; and if ever her hands were too full there were many willing nurses of the sterner sex willing and anxious to take her place.

It was astonishing the interest those rough diggers took in the child. It was a strange mixture, too, partly arising out of a sense of loyalty to Liza, and a great wonderment that this small atom, who could scarcely make his wee fist meet round one of their huge fingers, would some day—barring accidents—grow up into a big strong man like themselves. They would stand gazing at him in silence for minutes together, and then, looking at one another, shake their heads and agree that it beat them entirely.

But although he was always called "Liza's Boy," it was an understood thing from the first that he must be properly christened by a parson, and great were the discussions and many and various the suggestions as to what that name should be. Each one felt he had a personal interest in the matter, and was anxious for his particular suggestion to be adopted. There was a strong faction in favour of a Biblical name as the proper thing, and when one day whilst the subject was under discussion old Dinny had remarked, "Wasn't there a bloke in the Bible called Liza?" he was considered to have made a brilliant suggestion.

"You mean Elijah," said Jem Allen, who was better versed in Scriptural lore.

"Well, p'raps I do," assented Dinny. "But ain't Elijah the male for Eliza, and that's only Liza with a bit added on, and there you are," he finished up triumphantly and looked around the group for approval.

"Ay, ay, Dinny's right," said another. "But what sort of a bloke was this Elijah? We must think of that, you know. He might have been a regular bad lot, and then it wouldn't do at all, you know. Would it mates?"

The others agreed in various ways that it certainly would not do, and then waited in some anxiety for Jem as the greatest authority present to give them some further particulars of Elijah's character.

"Well, mates," said Jem, seeing they were waiting for him to speak. "I went to Sunday school when I was a kid, and it was there I heard about this fellow. I've forgotten most of it, but he seemed a proper sort of bloke, and not afraid to say what he thought. He talked straight out to the king of the country he lived in, and gave his wife beans. Then he had to clear out into the bush and hide, or they'd have killed him. He was a bit of a weather prophet in his way, and brought along a terrible drought. All the creeks and dams dried up and the sheep and cattle died by thousands."

"That's bad!" said old Ned, shaking his head solemnly. "A bloke that would bring along a drought must be a real bad lot." Old Ned had been a stockman in his young days, and spoke feelingly. "I'm afraid he wouldn't do at all."

There was a sympathetic murmur at this. Droughts were not things to be trifled with, and from that moment Elijah's fate was sealed.

"But what happened to him in the end?" asked Dinny, who was sorry to see his brilliant suggestion discarded.

"Oh! He wandered about the country for a bit with a mate of his," answered Jem, who was now tired of the subject, "and one day he was carried off in a chariot drawn by horses of fire. But he managed to throw down his swag to his mate before he disappeared."

"Rot!" said Joe Cairns, spitting in disgust. "I don't believe a word of it," and the sympathies of the meeting were with him. Jem was felt to have overstepped the bounds of probability and truth in a desire to impress his audience with his knowledge of ancient history.

This was only one of many discussions on the subject, but in them the two persons most concerned took no part. "Beauty Bob," otherwise Bob Green, took less interest in his little son than many others to whom he was bound by no tie of blood or natural affection, and beyond staring at the youngster in silence whenever he came to the store, took no part in the serious business of choosing his name. Liza, on the contrary, gave the matter much serious thought, but discussed it with no one until one day, when the baby was about six months' old, she asked Bob if he had chosen a name.

"No, Liza," he said. "Can't you choose one?"

"I thought of 'Richard Searle Green,'" she answered, and as Bob had no objection to this, the matter was settled. They were to drive into the township where the ceremony was to take place, in the waggon. Old Ned and the Dutchman were to be godfathers, as having had an interest in the baby before it was born, and Liza was to be godmother. But before the eventful day came, Bob had a startling proposition to make, which caused Liza no small surprise. He was sitting on a case in the store, with the baby in his arms, and allowing its small fingers

to close round the stem of his pipe, much to Liza's dissatisfaction, who was busy amongst the goods. From time to time he glanced at her, when her back was turned, and at last, mustering up his courage, spoke :

"Liza!" he said. "I've been thinking that when we go into the township to the parson next week we might have another ceremony performed at the same time."

"What's that, Bob?" she asked, taking the baby from him, and putting it into the improvised cradle, after first carefully cleaning the small hand that had been holding the pipe stem.

"Well, it's this way, you see," he answered, awkwardly, as if doubtful how his proposal would be received. "You and I are both interested in the kid, and I thought if we was to be married, and I came to live here and help you in the store, it would be comfortable for all parties."

Liza dropped a bag of flour she had been carrying, which fell on the floor with a dull thud, and sat down on a case in the very extremity of surprise.

"Have you gone dilly, Bob?" she asked, staring at him with wide open eyes.

"I mean it, Liza," he protested somewhat feebly.

"Do you, Bob?" she answered. "Well, understand that I don't. I don't want you loafing round here any more than you do at present. I've got enough to do without having you to look after as well, and besides what do you think Bourke would say?"

"What's he got to do with it?"

"A good deal I imagine, seeing this is his store. No, no, Bob! Go back to your claim and work. Don't stay here talking nonsense. I wouldn't marry you if you were made of gold;" and Liza got up and recommenced her work. Much discomfited, Bob got up and shuffled out of the store, and after she had enjoyed one good laugh

over the matter, Liza forgot all about it, and treated her would-be husband the same as before.

The christening was a great success. Old Ned and the Dutchman repeating all the "Amens" in the service with great emphasis, and promising and vowing all that was required of them with whole-hearted sincerity. Afterwards they returned to the store, and took some refreshment Liza had provided in honour of the occasion, and drank the health of Richard Searle Green, who in spite of the sanction of the church, still continued to be called "Liza's Boy."

So time went on, and the baby thrived and grew into a fine, sturdy boy, the delight of all the diggers, and filled the vacant place in Liza's large heart that had hungered for something to love and cherish as her very own. Even old Bourke seemed fond of him in his sour, crabbed way, and allowed him to play under the table at which he sat when weighing and purchasing the gold the diggers brought into the store.

One day, when the child was about five years old, Bob came into the store in a state of great excitement.

"There's a rush out Brown's Gully way!" he exclaimed to three or four men who were sitting smoking, "and I'm off to have a try."

"Who told you?" asked one, springing to his feet.

"Old Dinny heard it," was the reply.

The Dutchman laughed, and the questioner sank back on the case on which he had been sitting as if satisfied. "Only another of old Dinny's rushes," they agreed among themselves. He was noted for them, and no one had any faith in this turning out anything but a frost. However, Bob was not to be persuaded, and next day departed for the new rush, where he expected to make his fortune.

Then, indeed, Liza felt she had at last got her boy to

herself. Bob had gone off light-heartedly, and knowing the nomadic life that most of these diggers and fossickers led, Liza scarcely expected ever to see him return to Bourke's. In her secret heart she hoped he would not return. She wanted the boy to have no one to depend on but herself, to look to her for all things. What sweet dreams and hopes she nursed in her heart no one ever knew, but as the months passed by and Dick began to grow into a fine, sturdy boy, Liza's love for him grew in proportion until it became the one absorbing passion of her existence. Her great, lonely woman's heart was all given to him, and she hungered in a fierce, half savage way for his love in return. And then one day Dick fell ill, and Liza, wild-eyed and with dishevelled hair, again rushed along the bush track to the men's camp, and besought someone to ride for the doctor. Ready help was not wanting, and the doctor was brought, but not before Liza was nearly wild with anxiety. He prescribed for his small patient, and then left after Liza had paid his fee from her small savings. For days she scarcely left the boy's bedside—help was obtained from outside to keep the store going—and when at last the danger was over and the child about again, many grey hairs had appeared in Liza's head. She spoke to no one of what she had gone through, and perhaps suffered the more on that account. The boy returned her love with all the power of his young heart. His first word had been Liza, possibly because he heard it so often from the men in the store, and this was what he always called her. In the intervals of her work she took his education in hand, there being no school near enough for him to attend. He was bright, and learned with great facility.

So time went on very happily for Liza and the boy, and if at times the shadow of an inevitable parting, when

Dick should be grown big enough to go out into the world, came to darken the brightness of the present, she hid it in her own heart, and allowed no sign of it to be visible to him.

No word came from Bob, yet Liza was too conscientious to allow the boy to forget his father, though she was not anxious for him to return. Every night, when he said his prayers at her knee, "God bless dear papa" was a petition never forgotten, no matter how tired the small petitioner might be. But after all, he was only a name to Dick; Liza was the one person who at present filled all his childish fancies.

Spring, summer, autumn, and winter came and went while the quiet, happy life at the store continued, until over three more years were passed, and then one day there was a clatter of hoofs outside, and a man in riding costume came striding in.

"Hallo, Liza!" he exclaimed. "Glad to see me back again, eh?"

Liza looked, and with a sinking heart recognised him. "Bob!" she exclaimed, and, strong woman as she was, put her hand against the counter to steady herself. What she had always vaguely feared had at length come to pass. Bob had returned rich and prosperous—she could tell that from his clothes and the horse he rode—and would want to take Dick away with him.

"Bob it is, Liza!" he answered with a laugh. "But not the same Bob who left here three years ago, my girl. Where's the boy? Is he well?"

Liza nodded, she could not trust her voice just yet. There was a lump in her throat, and the store-room grew misty before her eyes, and seemed to turn round and round. But Bob was too pleased with himself to notice this. Seating himself on the counter, and lighting a

cigar—a thing never before seen or heard of at Bourke's, he proceeded to tell Liza of his fortunes, who, pale and sick at heart, listened in silence.

The rush at Brown's Gully had proved a frost, but from there he had gone on to other fields, and after wandering about for nearly a year, had made a lucky find, which in the end had proved so rich that now he had been able to get it floated into a company, and besides getting a large sum down, was drawing good dividends.

"I didn't write," he ended, "because I was waiting to see just where I was before I came for the boy."

"Came for the boy!" she gasped. "Oh, Bob! You wouldn't take him from me?"

It was a pitiful cry, wrung from her in the extremity of the moment, but the man never heeded it.

"Now, look here, Liza," he said. "What's the use of talking like that? You've had the boy for over eight years, and been very good to him. I will say; but now he is growing up you wouldn't push him on in the world, and I can. You had your chance, you know, when I offered to marry you," he added, with a brutal laugh.

"It's quite true what you say, Bob," she answered, slowly. All the spirit seemed to be crushed out of her. "But you must give me a day or two to think it over. I know I could do nothing for him now he is beginning to grow up, only love him," she added, half to herself.

"Right you are, Liza! You can have a couple of days to get used to it. I'll come out again on Thursday, but then you must be prepared to let me take him away. I can't waste any more time up here."

"Here he comes," said Liza. "Don't tell him you are going to take him away; leave that to me."

"Hello, my boy!" cried Bob as Dick ran into the store. "Come here and shake hands with your father."

The boy glanced at Liza in a frightened way, as if for confirmation of this statement. She nodded, and he moved slowly forward, putting out one small hand.

"How do you do, papa?" he said, and seemed glad to get his hand back again that he could stare at this new found father from a safer distance.

"How would you like to come away with me, Dick, and have a pony to ride and other boys to play with?" asked Bob.

"If you please, I think I would sooner stay here, and live with Liza," answered his small son, and Bob, meeting Liza's beseeching look, said no more on the subject.

"He's a fine boy and does you credit," were his last words ere riding away.

But this was no comfort to Liza. She was to lose her boy, her all, the one creature she had to love and cherish, and who loved her in return. No one witnessed her agony that night as she sat by the sleeping boy's bedside, and fought a bitter fight with her great longing to keep him. It was for his good, and he must go. She could do nothing for him only love him dearly, and love is sometimes so powerless to obtain the good so greatly desired for the loved one. And so perchance in the silent watches of the night her tears fell, but no one saw them save perhaps the recording angel, who noted them in his book, and in the morning when she took the boy upon her knee and told him they must part, she was dry-eyed and calm. Dick cried, and protested that he would not go, but this was of no use, and the next day he was in his childish way fairly reconciled to the change that was coming. Old Ned also was told, and passed the

news on to the other diggers, and many and awful were the curses showered on Bob's head.

"Say the word, Liza, and we'll break his blarsted neck the next time he shows his face here," said one, but Liza only shook her head with a mournful smile, and said it was for the boy's good. Very carefully she packed his clothes and little personal belongings, and when this was done there was nothing more but to say good-bye.

Bob had paid another visit and granted an extension of two days' time at Liza's entreaty. But this was soon over and the day of parting come. The trap that was to bear him away waited outside, and Liza on her knees in the store with the small figure in her arms was saying good-bye.

"You won't forget me, Dick," she pleaded.

"No, no, Liza dear!" he sobbed, "and I will write you letters often and come to see you as soon as ever I can."

Just for a moment she crushed the boy in her arms. There was no one there to see. The diggers with rough good feeling had all stayed away; they felt it was not a scene to be gazed upon. Hand in hand they walked out to the trap—it was driven by a stranger. Bob, with unexpected good feeling, had not come. She lifted him in, one last good-bye, and the trap started. Down the dusty bush track it went, while Dick, standing up, waved his hat to Liza until distance and tears hid her from sight. And the lonely woman left behind, into whose life there had come so little that was sweet and beautiful, and who had now lost the one ray of sunshine which had brightened her heart, leaving it darker and more empty than before, turned from gazing after the trap, and, with slow and heavy steps, re-entered the store—alone!

THE PASSING OF LIZA.

THE long, hot summer afternoon was drawing to a close as Liza came out on the store verandah, and, shading her eyes from the setting sun with one hand, gazed down the dusty bush track. There had been no rain for weeks, and the dust on the track and on the bare patch of ground in front of the store lay thick. A faint blue haze hung over everything, speaking of bush fires not far off, that when a wind sprang up might sweep along and destroy store and contents in its irresistible course. But it was not the thought of possible bush fires—though she had seen and suffered by them before—that made Liza's face anxious as she strained her eyes in search of something that was not in sight. Presently in the distance a figure appeared, trudging slowly along, followed by a little cloud of dust. Liza's eyes had caught sight of it immediately, and after pausing a moment to make sure, she turned and re-entered the store, where she busied herself until the sound of footsteps outside warned her the traveller had arrived. He came into the store-room with his hat in one hand and a huge red handkerchief in the other, with which he proceeded to wipe the sweat from his face.

"My oath, Liza, but it's a blazer outside," he said, seating himself on a case, "and the flies along the track

they're a fair caution fit to eat a fellow up. Blarst them, I say. I never could see any use in flies."

"Get the mail, Jem?" she asked, anxiously.

He nodded, and tossed some letters down on the counter.

"Three for Bourke," he said, "and some newspapers for the boys, that's all."

"Nothing for me, Jem?"

"No, Liza. Nothing! Casey's boy cut two of his toes off splitting wood last night, and they had to send him down to the hospital, and this morning his cow got stuck in the mud in the dam and got drowned. Shouldn't have thought there was enough water in the whole district to drown a rat let alone a cow; but some people have no luck," and Jem Allen proceeded to fill and light his pipe.

Liza turned away that he might not see her face. It had always been the same answer lately on mail days. "Nothing for you, Liza," and hope deferred was indeed making her heart sick. Eighteen months had come and gone since she had said good-bye to her boy, Dick, and watched him drive away down the track that led to the great world outside. At first the knowledge that she had done right in giving the child up to his father, who could push him on in the world, had served to buoy her up. And then, too, there had been frequent letters from him telling of all he was doing and learning, and filled with love for his dear Liza, letters which she had read again and again, and perhaps in secret shed a few tears over. But this was little for her love to feed upon, and the letters had gradually got shorter and arrived at longer intervals until now nearly three months had passed without any news at all. And so her heart ached sadly with longing for the child, life was so dull and uninteresting

without him. Perhaps if she had never had him at all she would have been fairly content, but having been, he had created a place in her heart which nothing else could fill. The cradle he had slept in as a baby, still bearing considerable resemblance to its original form of a kerosene case, was kept in a corner of her own room, and in a drawer hidden away from unsympathetic eyes were his baby clothes. Coarse things enough, for she had made most of them herself, and Liza was no needlewoman, only that most wonderful master, love, had taught her the way. She turned them over at times with tender hands when her longing was greatest. It seemed to bring him nearer to her, and reminded her of the time when he would sleep nowhere so well as in her arms. But she was too proud to let Jem Allen or anyone else see what she felt, and so she tried to go about her work as usual, laughing and bandying rough jests with the men. But her spirit had lost its old buoyancy, and she liked best the time when she was alone in the store, and there was no need to keep up appearances. Perhaps, however, Jem was wiser than he looked, for he got up presently, and with another uncomplimentary remark about the flies went outside, leaving Liza alone.

Sitting down on a case, and resting her elbows on her knees, she thought. The grey hairs had come thick and fast lately, and her face looked worn and much older, but her figure was erect and strong as ever, though she moved with a slower and heavier step. She was not one given to pitying herself, or surely in her hard and joyless life she could easily have found reason for doing so; but even to her it did seem hard that she must lose entirely the one being she loved. Had she not been there when he arrived in this world, a helpless atom of humanity? Whose hands but hers had closed his dead

mother's eyes, and hushed him to sleep when he cried for he knew not what? And then for eight happy years at the store she had been father, mother, everything to him, only to have to give him up at last to a father who would have deserted and disowned him long before but for her interference. Some thoughts such as these came to her as she sat there alone amongst the piles of cases and goods, while outside the shadows grew longer and longer as the sun sank behind the distant hills. It grew quite dark inside, and yet she never moved until the voice of old Ned aroused her.

"Anywhere about, Liza, my girl?" he called.

"Here, Ned! Here!" she answered, getting up and lighting a kerosene lamp.

The old man watched her without speaking. Old eyes are in many ways keener than young ones, for experience makes them so, and Ned guessed Liza's trouble well, though no words on the subject had passed between them. She served him with the goods he wanted, and then said,

"Ned, I've made up my mind to go to Melbourne for a few days. Jem Allen can look after things here while I'm away. I don't think Bourke will make any fuss about it."

"To see the boy, Liza?" he asked.

She nodded.

"Yes, Ned, to see the boy. I must see him. He is getting on for ten years old now, and I'm afraid he will forget me."

"No fear of that, my girl," said the old man, kindly. "But it will do you good to have a sight of the lad again."

"If Bob will let me, I shall bring Dick back here to stay for a bit; but I've not much hope of that," she

answered, and when the old man moved away she stood at the door, watching him till he was out of sight. And so the matter was arranged, and a few days after Liza started for Melbourne, her whole mind full of the one idea that she was to see her boy, Dick, again.

Jem Allen drove her to the township, where she was to catch the train, and most of the diggers who had heard of her going assembled to say good-bye. Many of them sent messages to the boy, and they gave her three cheers as the waggon drove away.

It was a long railway journey to Melbourne, but to Liza it did not seem so. Every throb of the engine, every station left behind brought her nearer to Dick, and she asked for no more. It was late at night when at last she reached the city. Too late to do anything but get a bed and wait for the morning that was to see her and Dick reunited. Very early she set out for Bob's house, and stopped at a shop in the city to buy a present for the boy. The tram would have taken her there quickly, but she preferred to walk—it seemed more natural to her—and so at about 9 o'clock she arrived at Bob's house. The pleasant suburban villa seemed palatial in Liza's eyes, and, used to early hours, she was astonished when the servant told her Mr. Green was at his breakfast, but would see her.

Bob was seated at the table when Liza was shown in. He did not rise or speak until the servant had left the room, closing the door behind her.

"Well, Liza! What's the trouble?" he said, coolly. "Have you left Bourke's?"

He had changed greatly with prosperity. Scarcely a trace of the digger remained, and he looked handsomer then ever in his well-fitting clothes.

"No, Bob," she answered. "I have not left Bourke's,

but it is a long time since Dick wrote, and I felt I must see him. Is he well?"

"Yes, Liza; quite well. But you see he has other friends now, and his education and that sort of thing take up most of his time, you know."

"Do you mean that he has forgotten me?" she asked.

"Well, perhaps not that yet, but it's sure to come soon, Liza. He has many other interests, and he doesn't need you now, you know."

The words cut Liza deep, as Bob intended they should.

"Can I see him?" she asked.

"He is at school at present," answered Bob, picking his teeth—the old Adam would out. "But you shall see him when he comes back this evening on condition that you promise me something."

"What is that, Bob?" she asked.

"I'm not going to ask you again to marry me," he said, with a laugh. "That is not the condition, so don't hope it."

"I never thought it was," she answered, with grave dignity. "Please tell me what it is you want me to promise."

"Only this, Liza, that when you have seen him you go back to Bourke's or somewhere else, and make no attempt to speak to him again."

"Bob, you can't mean it!" she cried, but he raised one hand as if to silence her, and resumed—

"I do mean it. I want him to forget all about his life at Bourke's with you, and he can't do that if you are coming here to remind him of it."

"I wouldn't do that, Bob. I only want to see him sometimes, so that he won't quite forget me."

It was a pitiful appeal from all the woman and mother

that was in her, but it struck no responsive chord in the man's heart.

"You can take it or leave it," he answered. "But you shan't see him unless you promise."

"But, Bob, he was my boy! I nursed him! I———" but speech forsook her, and she could only stretch out one hand in mute appeal. "Did not these hands nurse him?" it seemed to say. "Did they not close his dead mother's eyes? Would you have had him at all but for my love and care? And yet now you would take him from me!"

But the man was hard, and at last Liza promised. What else could she do? It was one last interview, or none at all. Perhaps none at all had been better, for when the time came Bob brought the boy into the room where Liza was waiting, and his presence seemed to chill the child, who only responded shyly to Liza's greeting. She took him on her knee and gave him the present she had purchased that morning with such a hopeful heart, and his young eyes looked into hers as if he longed to put his arms around her neck and once more rest his head on her bosom, only he dared not.

It was over. She had said good-bye, and caught one last glimpse of him looking longingly at her, and now she must go away and take up life again with no hope of seeing him any more.

It was evening, and the train that would take her home started presently. Should she go by it or wait? There was nothing to wait for, and yet she decided to stay till the next day. Perhaps Bob would relent, and yet in her secret heart she never hoped for that. However, she might see Dick again, though she must not speak to him. Even to see him would be something. And so on the morrow and for several days she watched the boy on

his way to and from school. He never knew, and each day she said to herself, "It is for the last time," and yet when the morrow came she lacked the resolution to go. At last it was forced on her, for her money was nearly done. "I will go to-morrow," she said to herself, as she trudged back into the city after waiting at the usual place to see Dick pass. The noise of the traffic always confused her, and on this evening it seemed worse than usual. The brilliant glare of the electric light bewildered and half-blinded her, used as she was only to the dull colouring of the bush. At a busy corner she stopped and hesitated before crossing. A little girl, scarcely up to her elbow, passed her, and commenced threading her way across the street. Liza followed. Half-way across, and there was a shout taken up and repeated from many quarters, a thunder of hoofs and roll of wheels, a warning cry, only just in time, for Liza had sprung forward, and, with all the strength of her great form, had thrown the child into safety and gone down herself under those terrible iron-shod hoofs, which galloped madly on, leaving her behind, stretched on the road battered and senseless.

Very tenderly they lifted her up, and carried her to the great red brick hospital in Lonsdale street—that house of pain that receives and shelters so much of poor suffering humanity. The doctors did what they could, but it was a case past hope, and so they laid her on a bed in a large cool ward, and waited for the end.

"Has she spoken, nurse?" asked a doctor, pausing at the bedside. "Her friends should be sent for if we could find out her name."

"I have tried, doctor, but she only rambles on about nothing."

"Try again, nurse," and so the nurse bent down and

spoke slowly and distinctly to the poor crushed form on the bed.

"Try and tell me your name, dear. We want to let your friends know you are here."

The heavy eyes unclosed, and gazed into the nurse's face, while the lips moved weakly.

"Liza!" she murmured with difficulty.

"Liza what, dear? Try to tell us your other name. See! I will bend down very low to catch what you say."

Again the heavy eyes looked at the nurse, and the poor weak lips moved.

"Liza!"

"Liza what, dear?"

"Just Liza. Liza of Bourke's!"

The tired eyes closed, and she seemed to sleep. The doctor went away, but the nurse remained, and presently she was rewarded.

"Send for them," came a weak voice from the bed.

"Send for whom?"

"My boy Dick and his father," and with a low, weak voice she gave the name and address.

The nurse hurried away.

"Are they coming?" Liza asked when she returned.

"They will soon be here now," was the reply.

And so she lay quiet, eagerly watching the door through which they must enter.

"Surely they are a long time, nurse? Perhaps they will be too late."

"They will soon be here now," said the nurse soothingly, and before the tired eyes opened again they were there.

"Liza. Dear, dear Liza. Open your eyes and speak to me. See! Papa and I have come to take you home with us to live, for always. Papa has promised."

The weary eyes opened, and gazed fondly at the loving little face that bent over her.

"Bob!" she said.

"Here, Liza!" he answered.

Perhaps he was thinking of how ten years before he had stood by that other bedside to which Liza had brought him where his boy's mother lay dying. Perhaps it was the thought of all she had done for his boy. Who can tell?

"Bob, you mustn't let him forget me. Remember, I nursed him. It can do no harm now."

"God help me, Liza! he shan't if I can prevent it," he answered.

"You promise, Bob?"

"And I'll keep it, Liza."

With a sigh of content and utter weariness she turned again to the boy, and with one weak hand drew his head down till it rested on the pillow beside her own.

"He has promised" she murmured very softly, and with the light of a far greater promise shining in her tired eyes, the great, loyal, unselfish soul of Liza of Bourke's left its poor, shattered, earthly body and passed out into the great unknown.

LONELY BILL'S MATE.

MOST of the huts and tents in the Black Gully diggings were within a comparatively short distance of one another, presumably for companionship's sake, though their owners' claims were scattered about over the gully. The field was not, and never had been, rich enough to make the careful pegging out or watching of claims a necessity, and so when a miner got tired of his location or gave up faith in its gold-bearing properties he cast his eye round for a spot to suit his fancy, and having found one, shifted his cradle, trough, and other tools over to it, and, provided it were not too close to his neighbours, proceeded to sink another shaft or take up washdirt out of an old one, without anyone offering an objection.

As this sort of change took place pretty often, it would have hampered matters much, and in the case of the mover being the fortunate possessor of a hut, been impossible for the miner to shift his camp as often as he did his claim. And so quite a little township had gradually grown up in that part of the gully where the huts were built and the tents pitched.

But there were one or two exceptions to this rule, the most notable being that of an old man known as "Lonely Bill." It was the position of his hut, which he had ori-

ginally taken over from another digger, and which was about a mile up the gully, rather than any habits of life on the part of the old man, which had earned for him the sobriquet by which he was known. True, he never invited any of the other miners up to his hut, but his claim was close to theirs, and he was often to be seen at the fireside of one or other of the huts, smoking his pipe and taking his part in the conversation or a hand in a game of cards.

He was a little, withered old man, and in his time had worked on more fields than any other miner in the camp. Something of a geologist in his way, he would talk of the strata, rim rock, and other technical terms in a learned way. But his knowledge—if indeed he really possessed any worth having—had never brought him success, though from his conversation one would have gathered that, in spite of many disappointments, he still had hopes of striking pay dirt and becoming a rich man. In fact he had two—I scarcely know whether to call them hopes or delusions, though they certainly partook very largely of both—which were inextricably bound up with one another. The first of these has been already mentioned. It was, that some day he would find the reef from which, according to his calculations, the alluvial gold in Black Gully had come, and of the existence of which he was firmly persuaded.

"It must be somewhere about," he would say whenever anyone expressed a doubt on the point. "Else where did the gold we're getting come from?"

"P'raps it just come from nowhere in particular," suggested the Dutchman, who was not strong on geology, but who knew where to sink as well as most.

But Lonely Bill rejected this suggestion with scorn.

"It's there right enough, and some day one or other of us will find it and be a rich man for life."

"Hope it's me, then, that's all," said Tom Hester, the youngest digger in the camp.

"It 'ud need to be precious near the surface for you to find it, my lad," answered the old man scornfully, and the laugh was against Tom, who was notorious for being fonder of hanging around Bourke's store than of hard work.

The young fellow scowled angrily at this remark, and left the fireside of old Ned's hut, where the conversation was taking place, and went outside to observe the night.

"You'd never know how to spend the money if you found it, Bill," one suggested.

"P'raps I would and p'raps I wouldn't," was the enigmatic answer. "Anyhow, I'm thinking that I wouldn't need to go far to find help in the spending once the finding was done."

"No! Blarst me if you would, mate!" said Dinny, an almost toothless old man, and renowned for his lurid language. "I'm ——— well only waiting to be asked, and I'll give any man all the help he needs in that line, and so will those other ——— I'll stake my oath."

No one paid much attention to this outburst. Most of them were hard swearers, and used to hair-raising language, though Dinny was often pronounced to be a regular scorcher at the art.

This was only one of many conversations on the reef. No one believed in its existence but "Lonely Bill," and gradually the expression, "When Lonely Bill finds the reef," came to be accepted amongst the society of Black Gully much as the term "*Ad Kalendas Græcas*" is received in a different walk of life.

So much for the old digger's first hope or delusion.

He found pleasure in talking about it to all and sundry. But the second one, though it was intimately connected with the first, he never mentioned, and none about him had the slightest idea of what was constantly in his thoughts. It was a secret, and the old man hugged it to himself in private during the long evenings when he sat alone by his own fireside.

It was this: "Lonely Bill" had a daughter, and it was for her sake he was so anxious to find the reef. In his younger days Bill had been married, and his wife had followed him about from one field to another, until she was taken sick and died, leaving behind her a little girl about six years old. It had been impossible for him to take the child about with him once the mother was gone, so he had put her in charge of a woman who was willing to take her for a small yearly sum, in the hope that as the girl grew older she would become useful, and thus repay her foster parent for all trouble and expense. Small as the sum was it took the old man all his time to keep up with the payments, and in the twelve years that had elapsed since his wife's death he had often suffered much that the money might be ready at the end of the quarter for his daughter's board.

But he always comforted himself with the thought that some day, when his luck turned and he was a rich man, he would make a lady of his daughter. Very little would do for him; it should all be spent on her. She must have the best of everything—fine dresses and jewellery, even a carriage if possible. The thought sweetened his labours, and though year after year passed without the success he longed for, he never lost hope, though the baby girl had now grown into a young woman. Once a year—no matter how far off he might be—he took a holiday and tramped away to see her, never forgetting to

take her some little present which he bought in one of the towns through which he might have to pass.

And now another year was nearly past, and the time had come to visit her again. Each year when he said good-bye to her, and she wished him good luck, he set out feeling sure that the luck would come before he saw her again, and that then at last he would carry out all his plans for making her a lady.

But this last year had been worse than any previous ones. Whether it was that he was getting older and could not work as hard as formerly, or whether it was just that his luck was out, the fact remained that, even after selling all his hard-won stock of gold, he would, for the first time in twelve years, be several pounds short in the payment he should make for his daughter's keep.

He thought over this as he sat in front of the fire in his lonely hut on the night before he was to set out on his yearly pilgrimage.

"It must be there," he muttered to himself. "In spite of what they all say it must be there; only it takes me so long now to earn tucker for myself and a little money for the lass that I've no time left to look for it."

He got up, and from a small box on a shelf above the fireplace took a cheap photograph of a young girl and sat down to look at it.

"She's a fine girl," he went on. "A fine girl, though older now than when this was took. She must be eighteen now, almost a woman." He paused, then with something like a groan, "Almost a woman, and the luck not come yet."

For a long time he sat gazing at the picture, letting his pipe go out in the intensity of his thought. At last he rose and put the photograph away as if his mind were made up on some important matter.

"I'll do it," he said. "I'll do it. She'll be willing enough I'll stake my oath. It'll give me more time to look for the reef, save a bit of money, and make me stronger to work for her. Damn it! she shall be a lady if I can manage it for her!"

And so the next morning, after locking up his hut and leaving the key with old Ned, he set out on his journey to visit the daughter who was the centre of all his thoughts.

He had not told anyone where or why he was going, but had announced that he would return in about a fortnight; and sure enough one evening after about that space of time had elapsed, old Ned remarked to the men assembled round the fire in his hut—this hut was always the general meeting place for the miners, it being larger and more central than any of the others, and besides, the owner was a sort of boss of the camp—that "Lonely Bill" was back from his tramp, and had come for the key of his hut that afternoon.

"Brought his —— reef with him, I hope," remarked old Dinny, who was playing euchre with three other men by the light of a candle stuck in the neck of a bottle.

"Don't know about that, Dinny," said Tom Hester, from his place by the fire, "but he's brought something else with him, for I saw it."

"Your blarsted luck again, Dutchy!" Dinny growled, with many oaths, for he had been losing all the evening. "What's he brought back with him, youngster?" he demanded, getting up from the table.

"You'd never guess," answered Tom, proud of possessing an exclusive piece of intelligence, and anxious to delay imparting it.

"I'm —— well certain I ain't going to try," was the answer. "Lonely Bill ain't of no account to me at all,"

and he kicked the fire together with his foot. Losing at cards always irritated him.

"He's brought a mate back with him," said Tom Hester, looking round the hut to see how this piece of intelligence would be received by those present.

"A mate! My oath, he's coming along is Bill," said Joe Cairns. "How do you know?"

"Saw them both at his hut this evening, and Bill says, 'This 'ere's my mate, Tom,' says 'e. 'Come to 'elp me find the reef.' And then he laughs one o' them queer laughs of his like as if it was a grand joke."

"What sort of a bloke is 'e?" asked Dinny.

"What! Lonely Bill?" asked Tom in pretended surprise, for he nourished a grudge against the other for calling him youngster. "Thought you'd often seen him, Dinny. He's something like you, now I come to think of it."

"As long as he's not like you it's all right," growled Dinny. "One of you in a camp's warm enough. Curse me if it ain't."

But Tom Hester paid no heed to this remark, for he was telling the other men about "Lonely Bill's" new mate.

"He's a young chap, only a boy," he said. "With a soft face, and blow me he put out his hand to shake when Bill said, 'This ere's my mate,' and it felt just like a girl's."

"Wonder were 'e rose him?" said Joe Cairns.

"Found him on the road, and brought him along to help find the reef, and show you blokes how to work," answered Tom, who seemed to know all about the matter.

Certainly, wherever he had got him, "Lonely Bill's" mate excited considerable interest in the Black Gully com-

munity, which was not allayed when the next day he was seen working on the claim. He certainly was very young and soft-looking, altogether unsuited to the rough life of a digger, and as time went on it was seen that he avoided the other men as much as possible.

"Why don't you bring your mate down with you?" old Ned asked one evening when "Lonely Bill" had arrived as usual at the hut for a yarn and game of cards. "It's lonely up at your hut."

"Said 'e was tired" growled Bill, and cut for the deal.

"How old is he? 'Bout ten?" asked Dinny.

"Never asked him," answered the other, obviously anxious to talk of something else.

"Goin' to give 'im half shares in the reef when you find it?"

"No, three-quarters," and there was a general laugh.

And so time went on, and gradually "Lonely Bill's" mate became a familiar sight, and the others ceased wondering and speculating about him. He became known as "the boy" on account of his youth, and if anyone knew his real name it was never used. The soft hands which had reminded Tom Lester of a girl's became rough and hard, and even his voice began to take a gruffer tone. At first he had never accompanied Bill when he went to play cards of an evening at one of the huts; but gradually he began to put in an appearance at these also, though he never took much part in the conversation, evidently preferring to remain quietly in a corner by the fire.

"Why don't you smoke?" old Dinny had demanded with an oath on the first of these occasions.

"I don't want to, thanks," answered the boy.

"Afraid it 'ud make you sick, eh?"

"I expect it would."

"Well, try this, then. It'll make a man of you, you young dog," answered Dinny, holding out a foul-smelling pipe, while the boy shrank back as if afraid.

"Smoke it, or by God I'll kick you!" he went on, approaching closer.

But Tom Hester had been watching, and now took a part in the conversation.

"Leave the boy alone you blarsted old bully!" he exclaimed starting up, and Dinny turned to face this new adversary.

"Curse me!" he screamed angrily—the absence of any teeth in his mouth always made his voice particularly horrible. "What the —— are you interfering for? I'll do as I like."

"Not with that boy," answered Tom quietly.

"By God, I will!" was the furious reply, and he turned to resume his bullying.

But there was no further need for Tom to interfere, for the boy was gone. He had slipped out of the hut as soon as old Dinny's back was turned, and presently, when the other's attention was occupied, Tom Hester also left quietly, and without saying good night.

"Lonely Bill" had been playing cards whilst this incident took place, and apparently paid no heed to it; though if the light had been better they might have observed, had they been watching, that his hand trembled as he held the cards, and that when the others were watching Dinny he had signalled to the boy to leave the hut.

And this was only the first of many occasions on which old Dinny bullied the boy. He seemed to have taken an extraordinary dislike to him, and enjoyed making him the butt of his vile humour on every possible opportunity. The other miners only laughed, or paid no at-

tention at all. It was good for the youngster, they thought. He was over soft, even for a boy; and besides, since the night in old Ned's hut when the bullying had begun, they looked upon Tom Hester as the proper person to interfere.

And indeed Tom stuck bravely to his self-imposed task of protecting the boy, who did not seem, in this matter at least, to be able to protect himself. And many were the rows between him and old Dinny, though the latter confined himself to using the foulest of language, and never attempted to lay hand on the boy when his protector was by.

Outwardly at least "Lonely Bill" took this persecution of his mate very calmly. Perhaps he thought Tom's interference was sufficient; perhaps he had other reasons; but, if so, he confided them to no one, and apparently did not trouble his head about the matter.

And so the time went by, and it began to be noticed that Tom Hester, who had been known as the laziest worker in the Gully, was now "putting his back into it" in a way he had never done before. Not only did he work hard on his own claim, but often found time to lend the boy a helping hand on his; for after a couple of months "Lonely Bill" began to leave his mate to work the claim alone, and earn tucker for them both, while he fossicked about in new ground in search of that hidden reef which occupied so large a part of his thoughts.

"Never see you up at Bourke's now, Tom?" said Joe Cairns one morning.

Bourke's was the general store where the miners got their provisions and sold their gold.

"No," answered Tom, "you don't."

"Ain't you going there now?"

"Not more than I can help."

"Why?" persisted Cairns, curiously.

"Got no time to waste hanging about stores."

"I see," with a loud laugh. "Got the kid to look after, ain't you? Do you put him to bed o' nights?"

But Tom was good-humoured, and not going to lose his temper over a bit of chaff.

"Either that or something else," he answered calmly, going on with his panning off; and the other, rightly judging there was nothing to be got out of him, passed on to his own claim.

And then one day there was a great commotion in the camp, for Dinny rushed into old Ned's hut about noon almost inarticulate from rage. At any time his speech was none of the pleasantest, but on this day it was something to be remembered by all who heard him. At first, used as they were to him, it was impossible to gather any sense from the mixture of wild and awful oaths and curses which fell from his lips. In his rage he foamed at the mouth, and worked his almost toothless gums about in a horrible manner in the endeavour to explain what was the matter.

At last they made it out. He had been robbed, robbed of over half an ounce of rough gold which he had kept in his hut; and once this was thoroughly understood, Dinny was not the only excited man in the camp. Such a thing had never happened in Black Gully before, and the diggers had always considered themselves safe from thieves, never taking any especial care for the safe custody of their hard-won gold, even leaving it in its usual place in their huts when they went to work. It might have happened to any of them, they thought, and it was this which helped to arouse their excitement and indignation to fever pitch. With a thief in the camp none of them was safe. Some of the older diggers who had

been on the fields in the early days remembered the rough and ready justice there meted out to thieves, and what they said excited the younger men to a like feeling now.

The news spread through the camp, and in a little while over a hundred men were gathered near old Ned's hut, while above the noise of their excited voices discussing the news could be heard Dinny's voice, screaming curses and threats of the vengeance he would wreak on the thief when he should be discovered.

It was some time before they could get from the old man a coherent account of his loss; and even then there was not much to tell.

He had left the gold—over half an ounce of it, the produce of two weeks' work—in a tin by the fire to dry before taking it to the store to sell, and had gone away to work, forgetting all about it. When he returned the tin was gone. That was all he knew; and again he burst into curses against the thief.

"Could you recognise any of it if you saw it again?" asked old Ned, who had naturally dropped into the position of head of this informal inquiry.

"Could I? Of course I could!" answered Dinny. "There was a piece like a dumbbell and another like a heart. I showed 'em to you, Dutchy, a few days ago."

"Ay!" answered the Dutchman. "I saw 'em."

"Would you know them again?" asked old Ned of his mate.

The Dutchman nodded. He was a man of few words.

Here at least was a clue if they could only find the gold. Dinny was speaking in a low voice to old Ned, and the latter was seen to shake his head doubtfully.

"Ask 'em," urged Dinny.

"Mates," began old Ned, addressing the crowd of diggers. "You all want this matter cleared up, because

while there's an undiscovered thief here none of us will feel safe."

"Ay! That's so!" came a murmur of voices.

"Well, then, Dinny here wants to know if you will allow a committee of three, of which the Dutchman must be one, as he has seen some of the pieces, and could recognise them again, to inspect the gold every man has in camp. No one is suspected as yet, and this is a chance for every man to prove his innocence. You can elect who you like to do the work, but I am not keen on the job, though I will show my gold first if you like."

There was a murmur amongst the men, and several voices were raised in opposition to this proposal. Very clearly it did not meet with any approval, and Ned turned to Dinny to withdraw it.

"Go to Bourke's first and see if the stuff has been sold there," a man shouted; and this at least seemed to meet with more approval than the previous proposal.

Old Ned did not think much of it, however.

"It's hardly likely the thief would go to Bourke's to sell it, mates," he said. "The risk would be too great."

"Where else could he sell it?" someone asked.

"Most like he would keep it hid for a bit, and then take it down to town, where it would be less likely to be recognised."

"True enough; but let's try Bourke's first, anyway," came a voice from the crowd; and old Ned, seeing that the men were in no humour to show their gold, consented, though he had not much hope of success, for even if the thief had been foolish enough to sell the stolen gold there, he would probably have taken any recognisable pieces and battered them into shapeless lumps before trying to dispose of them.

And so a committee of three, including the Dutchman,

set out for Bourke's store to inspect any gold that might have been sold during the previous twenty-four hours, while the rest of the men broke up into little groups to discuss the affair and await the return of the committee.

In a couple of hours they returned, big with news, which quickly spread from mouth to mouth. The gold had been sold at Bourke's only a couple of hours before, without any attempt at concealment, for the Dutchman had easily been able to identify several pieces as having been shown to him by old Dinny a few days before, and their rightful owner was now pointing them out from amongst other specimens displayed in old Ned's hut. But the most astonishing part of the news was that the man who had sold the stolen gold had just returned to camp, and was now in his hut.

"Who is it?" passed rapidly from mouth to mouth, and then suddenly they all knew, and were silent and surprised, for Tom Hester, with a white, astonished face, and his hands tied behind him, was seen approaching between two miners, who had surprised him in his hut.

A murmur went through the crowd, and men pressed forward to see what was going to happen, while high above the sound of voices rose old Dinny's horrid scream of delight at the sight of the enemy who had robbed him.

"Curse you!" he cried. "You —— interfering young fool. I'll cut the —— heart out of you for this, you ——, by the —— I will."

The trial and judgment were to be summary—anyone could see that, for the offence was beyond pardon in the miners' eyes. By universal consent old Ned was appointed judge, and took his seat on a case at the side of his hut, with a jury of six close by, while Tom Hester, carefully guarded, stood in front of him dazed and stupefied looking. The rest of the men crowded round in a half-

circle, the ends of which joined the hut, thus cutting off all hope of escape.

But no such thought seemed to come to him, and he appeared only partly conscious of what was going on while old Ned formally accused him of the theft, and with a certain rude dignity that made the proceedings very solemn recited the proofs against him.

"Tom Hester, you have heard the charge against you," old Ned concluded. "Have you anything to say?"

A shiver went through the young man's body. He drew himself up, and for the first time appeared to see what was going on around him. No man spoke, but presently in a steady voice, that could be heard by all, the prisoner answered the question put to him.

"I sold the gold that you say belongs to that old man there," and he indicated Dinny with a movement of his head. "But I did not steal it, nor did I know it belonged to him, else I would not have touched it."

He threw back his head and gazed round at the men who encircled him as if daring them to disbelieve his words.

"Where did you get it, then?"

"That I refuse to tell."

There was a murmur from the crowd and a scream of rage from old Dinny.

"Hang the ——!" called someone, and the cry was taken up by several voices.

But now there came an interruption. Into the group sprang a boy, wild-eyed and panting—no one had remarked his absence before—and sank down at Tom Hester's feet, clasping both his arms round the prisoner's knees.

"Let him go," he cried, in a high, shrill voice. "Let him go at once, I say. He never stole the gold. I did."

I took it all from old Dinny's hut and gave it to him to sell for me, telling him it was mine. Oh, let him go. You mustn't hurt him!"

The crowd pressed forward eagerly, while old Ned spoke.

"Do you know what you are saying, boy? Is this true?"

"Yes, yes; it is true!" he cried. "But you are all wrong, and I am not a boy. See!"

With a quick movement he sprang up and tore off the loose shirt from his shoulders, revealing a woman's form, and turning round that all might see.

There was a great roar of astonishment from the assembled men, but "the boy" had sunk down again and hidden his face against "Lonely Bill's" shoulder.

"She's my daughter, mates," said the old man, looking round with anxious eyes, and pulling the torn shirt over the girl's shoulders. "I brought her here, but never thought of anything like this. Let her be, mates, and I'll pay back old Dinny's gold."

The rough men looked at one another and muttered to themselves. All at once they seemed anxious to be anywhere but where they were, and already one or two had sneaked quietly away. Willing hands unbound Tom Hester's arms and patted him on the back.

"I knew mates," he said huskily. "I love her, and she has promised to be my wife. I couldn't speak."

They were melting away quickly, some pausing to shake him by the hand. In a minute or two they were all gone. Then Tom Hester stooped down, and lifting the girl from where she lay sobbing in her father's arms, carried her tenderly into old Ned's hut.

HIS LITTLE MAID'S FORTUNE

THEY were a small and somewhat conservative community at Black Gully. Many of the diggers had been there for some time, one or two even for years, and as the yields were never very good, and often very bad, the fame of the place did not spread abroad to attract the tribe of wandering diggers and fossickers, who are ever on the look-out for a new find. Nevertheless, those who came there generally remained for some time, for at least there was a living to be got for the man who worked late and early, and knew how to make the most of his chances. They were not very particular about claims, and provided a man did not come nosing round too close to his neighbour he could dig where he liked, and never fear the advent of a policeman, or that other functionary, the warden, who was no more than a name to most of them, with a request to see his "right." Indeed, few, if any, of them had miners' rights, but for all that they were never disturbed, and continued month after month at the work of turning Black Gully inside-out and getting in return for their labour a few pennyweights of gold, which on Saturday afternoon they took to Bourke's store and sold to buy provisions and tobacco for the week to come.

As a general rule, they worked in pairs, though many of them lived alone, either in tents or huts of bark, these latter erected by the diggers who intended to make the place their home so long as it should afford them a living.

The two oldest inhabitants, both by right of age and years of residence, were old Ned and the Dutchman. These two had lived together in the same hut for years, and though they seldom spoke save when it was necessary, were considered by the other diggers to be a first-class pair of mates.

Not far from their hut was another, now uninhabited and fast falling to pieces, which had once belonged to one Bob Green, or "Beauty Bob," latterly known as "Lucky Bob," by reason of the fact that he was commonly reported to have made his fortune on some other field which old Dinny had told him of, but not had sufficient faith in to try himself, preferring to remain at Black Gully. And so the hut had remained without a regular tenant, all the diggers having their own places, until it was little more than a ruin, and then one day a wandering digger came along, and taking up his abode there proceeded to put the place in order in a clumsy, unskilled way.

It was easy to see that he was new to the work—in fact, new to manual labour of any sort. His pick, shovel, dish, and other implements were all new, and he gazed about him as if even the bush were something he was quite unused to. The other diggers watched his hut-building efforts from afar off, and commented on them at their own firesides. They were a good-hearted lot, and quite willing to assist his inexperienced efforts should he ask them, but in their own way they were proud and reserved, and unwilling to run the risk of a refusal at the hands of this stranger. So he was allowed to proceed

with his work alone, without either interference or offers of assistance, and, as he made no overtures to acquaintanceship, the small community fell to speaking of him amongst themselves as "the stranger," and giving little attention to his doings.

Having at last put the hut into something like habitable repair, the stranger proceeded in the same lonely, unskilled way to sink a shaft. For this purpose he chose a piece of ground that had been passed over many times by others as too unlikely to make it worth while sinking. For days he laboured at it, and then, failing to find a wash of any sort, gave it up in despair, and started another shaft some little distance away. Here he was more successful, and having struck a wash he proceeded to "pan off" some of it as a trial.

By this time he had been over three weeks at Black Gully, and so far had not said more than "Good day, mate," to anyone. Indeed, he seemed to wish to be left alone, and always went to the store for his provisions early in the week, thus avoiding the crowd of diggers who assembled there on Saturday afternoons.

It was old Ned who held the first conversation with him, and gave him the first hint as to how to go about his work. The old man was passing by on his way back from work one evening, and found the stranger panning off.

"Working late, mate?" he said, and the other looked up from his dish at the sound of the voice.

"Yes," he assented with something like a stifled sigh.

"Any luck, mate?"

"Just a few specks," was the answer.

"Let's have a look at it," said the old man in a kindly way, and the stranger handed him the dish. The

other "washed it off" with skilful hands, and then handed it back.

"We call them colours," he said. "Specks are big bits weighing may-be an ounce or so. I'm afraid you've struck a poor patch."

Again the stranger seemed to stifle a sigh, but as he made no answer old Ned moved away towards his own hut. That night when he and the Dutchman were sitting smoking after tea, Ned spoke—

"That bloke in Bob's old hut ain't got much chance of doing any good here."

The Dutchman gave a grunt; he was a man of few words, but his mate understood him, and continued.

"I saw him panning off this evening, and he'd have lost more than half of it if there'd been anything to lose, which there weren't. He talked about specks, too."

"Never saw no specks about here," growled the other in his deep voice, and again relapsed into silence.

Old Ned contemplated the blazing logs for some time, and then, his pipe having gone out, he spoke again.

"There's that old cradle of ours we might lend him; we never use it now, and it's mighty slow work panning-off without a cradle."

But the Dutchman made no answer—he had gone to sleep.

The next morning Ned took the cradle across to the stranger, and showed him how to use it, and thus began a sort of friendship between the two men. But towards the other diggers the stranger made no advances, continuing to live his solitary reserved life as before.

So things went on for some months, during which the stranger sank several shafts and cradled many bucketfuls of wash for a few pennyweights of gold, while all the time he grew thinner, and a strange, feverish, longing

look came into his eyes at times which it was not good to see, only there was nobody to see it, for he shunned even Ned, except when the old man was alone. He muttered, too, over his work, strange fragments without beginning or ending, but as there was nobody to hear either, it didn't matter much, and he disturbed no one. He started work earlier and knocked off later than the others, which made Dinny remark that he seemed in a terrible hurry to get rich.

One evening it happened that old Ned was sitting alone by the fire in his hut when there came a low knock at the door. The Dutchman had gone to a hut close by for a game of cards, and the old digger had been dozing over a week-old newspaper.

"Come in!" he called, and the stranger's form appeared in the doorway.

"May I come in for a bit?" he asked in a nervous, uncertain sort of way. "I saw your mate go out, so I knew you were alone, and I wanted to have a talk."

"Ay, mate! Come in and welcome!" was the hearty reply. "There's not such a lot of company round these parts that we can afford to lose what's going. There's tea in the billy there if you'd like some."

The stranger shook his head, but sat down near the fire, while old Ned filled his pipe and prepared for a yarn.

"Had any luck yet?" he asked presently.

The other shook his head before replying.

"Not quite three pennyweights last week," he said; "but it's the best I've had yet."

"Not much more than tucker in that, mate, but I've had many worse weeks in my time."

"Have you been a digger long?" asked the stranger.

"Matter of thirty year I should say."

The other sighed.

"And you have'nt given up hope yet?" he asked.

"Hope! What for?"

"Of making a fortune, I mean. Of one day coming on a pocketful of nuggets, and being a rich man for life."

"Don't think I ever had such a hope, mate."

"But it does happen sometimes, doesn't it?" asked the stranger, anxiously scanning Ned's face. "I've often read of it happening."

"So have I," answered the old man, slowly. "But I can't say as I've known of a case for a sight of years now."

"But surely it might happen any moment. There must be as good gold in the ground as has been taken out of it. Either you or I might come on a pocket to-morrow, and never need to work again."

He seemed feverishly anxious to obtain an assent to his imaginings, but it did not come from old Ned.

"We might," he answered, sceptically. "But I wouldn't count on it if I was you, mate."

The stranger sighed again and gazed into the fire as if seeking there for further arguments for what he was anxious to believe. Presently he turned to his companion again, and spoke with a new note of hope in his voice.

"After all, I don't wonder you have given up hope," he said. "You say you have been a digger for thirty years, and now you are old—but I only began it three or four months ago, and am young and strong. Look at my arm!" and he bared one forearm and held it out for his companion's inspection. It was thin and undeveloped, and beside it old Ned's would have looked the arm of a veritable Hercules.

"You ain't been much used to hard work," said Ned, looking at it and mistaking the other's idea.

"No! I was brought up to something quite different, but all that is over now, and I must succeed at this or go under."

"Well, you're getting the hang of things now, and ought to be able to make a living at the game."

"I must do more than that," broke in the other, excitedly. "It's a fortune I want."

"Fortunes ain't easy made."

"God knows that is true, but I must make one all the same."

The old digger glanced at his companion curiously. The stranger was resting his head in his hands, and gazing into the fire.

"Cheer up, mate," he said, and at the sound of the words the man raised his head.

"I'll tell you why I must make a fortune," he said, with that strange light in his eyes. "But you must not tell the others, for I don't want anybody to know. Down in Melbourne I have a daughter, the dearest little maid in all the world—and she loves me, and thinks me the best daddy that could be. When her mother died, three years ago now, she left me four thousand pounds for the child, and I promised her to keep it safe, and use it only for the little maid. But, God forgive me, I was a rogue and used it for myself, gambled it away, and lost it, every penny. Then I lost my position, and with it every hope of paying back the money save by a great stroke of luck."

"And so you came here, and hope to find it by digging?" asked old Ned, slowly.

"It was the only way," answered the other, with a note of despair in his voice. "And I must succeed! It is sure to come in time if I only work hard enough. Others have found more than that, why should not I?" He

looked at his companion with something defiant in his expression, and the old man, who knew so well and by such long and bitter experience what the probabilities were, could not find it in his kind heart in the face of such an infatuation to undeceive him.

"Cheer up, mate!" he said again. He could think of nothing else to say.

"She is all the world to me," went on the other, with a hard, dry sob in his voice. "If she ceased to think well of her daddy I should kill myself. Now you understand why I must have some luck. God will never be so cruel as to let me work like this and then not give me what I want."

This was a mode of reasoning old Ned did not at all understand, so he made no reply, but stirred the fire into a more cheerful blaze. The stranger, with his face buried in his hands, sat on for some time in silence, and then with a low, "Good night, mate," got up and left the hut.

The old digger thought much of his strange companion during the next few days, but said no word of their conversation to anybody, and for a time things went on as before. Then one afternoon, when most of the diggers were at the store, the stranger burst in on old Ned, who was alone, tidying up the hut, and with a wild light of exultation in his eyes, cried out in a hoarse whisper—

"I've found it, mate! I told you it was sure to come if I only worked hard enough, and now it has come."

"What's come?" asked the other, in surprise.

"The fortune; my little maid's fortune."

"Do you mean you've struck pay dirt?"

"More than that, man, a pocket, the pocket I've been dreaming about and praying for."

"And what's in the precious pocket?"

"Gold, man; lumps as big as your fist. Thirteen of them, and yet they say thirteen is an unlucky number."

"Are you sure, mate?" said the old man, straightening up, and looking at his companion carefully, not knowing what to think. "The place has been turned well nigh inside out, and such a thing never happened before. Are you sure you ain't deceived?"

The other laughed in a peculiar way.

"Don't I tell you I've got it, man? I found it this morning, and I've been wanting to come over and tell you ever since, only I had to wait until the others were gone, for we must keep it a secret, you and I, or they would want to get it; to take away my little maid's fortune, and that would never do. It must be all kept for her—all for her," and he glanced round the hut as if fearful that someone might be listening.

"Where have you got it, mate?" asked old Ned, still doubtful.

"Listen!" said the other, coming close, and whispering. "I put the nuggets—the thirteen nuggets—in my billy, and they filled it right up to the very top, and then I buried it in front of the fireplace in my hut. Come over and see it, and then you will believe; but you must never tell."

He led the way out of the hut, and along the track to his own place, while the old man followed, deeply perplexed over the matter—for not for one instant did he believe in the existence of the gold as described—and yet the other seemed so certain of it.

Arrived at the hut, the stranger carefully closed the door, and then with a shovel dug a small hole in front of the fireplace, from which he produced his tea-billy.

"Here it is!" he said in a low, excited voice. "The whole thirteen of them. They are all dirty, but I was

afraid to clean them, and besides, what does it matter when they are gold—real gold."

He lifted the lid carefully, and old Ned bent forward to look at this strange find. One glance was sufficient, and he straightened up with a jerk and scanned his companion closely. The contents of the billy had given him a clue to the whole matter. The stranger was mad, and the tin contained nothing but some large, heavy yellow stones partly covered with pipeclay, and often found in alluvial wash.

For a moment he did not know what to do, so he took out the top stone and pretended to carefully estimate its weight, while the stranger watched him closely.

"And so this is your find?" he said at last.

"Yes. Didn't I tell you it was there? Now, perhaps, you believe. Do you think there's £4000 there?" he asked, putting out his hand for the stone Ned held, and when he had put it back proceeding to bury the billy in its former resting-place.

"That billy full of gold should be worth £4000 any day," was the reply, after an interval of silence. "But I must be getting along, mate." He wanted to be alone to think over what he ought to do.

"You won't tell anybody, will you?" said the man, appealingly. "It's all for my little maid, you know, and I must keep it safe—safe."

"What are you going to do with it?" asked old Ned, pausing at the door.

"I'm going to keep it here until my usual day for going to the store, and then I'll clear out and take it down to Melbourne. If I went now the others would wonder, and I must not excite suspicion."

"Well, so long, mate!" and old Ned tramped away, leaving the other to hug his golden dream in solitude.

The old digger sat late by the fire that night, pondering. The man was mad, there was no doubt of that, and his wonderful find was valueless dirt. And yet he was so happy in his infatuation that it seemed cruel to dispel his dream, and there was besides a very strong chance that the delusion was so firmly fixed that it would be useless to try to remove it. Finally he turned in to his bunk without having decided what to do, and for the next two days he was no nearer a decision. But one afternoon brought its own solution of the problem.

It was nearing knock-off time when a man ran up to him, and with an agitated voice cried out :

"There's been a fall in the stranger's claim, Ned. He's terribly smashed up, and askin' for yer."

"Where is he?" asked the old digger, putting down his dish.

"In 'is hut. They took him there after we'd dug 'im out."

Ned hurried off, and found the stranger lying in his bunk, while two or three men stood by. There was nothing to do, for the man was horribly crushed and mangled, and life was ebbing fast. But for all that he caught sight of Ned as he entered the hut, and as the old man bent over him he whispered, "Send them away, mate, I want to speak to you alone."

The men partly heard, partly guessed what he said, and as Ned looked round at them they tramped out of the hut, and left the two alone.

"I'm dying, mate!" said the stranger.

Old Ned nodded.

"And I needn't have gone to work at all, only I didn't want them to suspect about it, and I was afraid they would guess if I didn't go to work as usual," he mused. Then, with an effort, "The fortune, mate, my little

maid's fortune. Will you take charge of it for her? — I can trust you, I know."

The other started. In the face of fast approaching death he had forgotten those lumps of worthless stone, which the dying man had hidden away, and called his little maid's fortune.

"I can trust you to take it to her," went on the weak voice. "There are a few papers in my swag that will tell you all about it, and where she is, and you must take your expenses out of the money. Will you do this?"

For a moment the old man hesitated. It seemed too cruel to try to dispel his illusion now, when in a few minutes he would be dead, and yet—

"Promise me!" the dying man persisted, and as old Ned stood there, looking down into the pleading eyes, it seemed the only thing to do. Let him keep his illusion for his few remaining minutes of life if it made him happy and death any easier. It seemed wanton cruelty to take it from him, since no one suffered by it, and if the lie had to be answered for somewhere else it would not make much difference in his account. At any rate he would risk it. So thought old Ned, and then, with the other's eyes upon him, he promised.

"Let me look at them again," said the stranger, and when the other took him the billy, with its load of dirty stones, he asked for one to be put into his hand.

"This one is for you," he said, trying to hand the worthless lump to his companion. "The others are all for my little maid, with her daddy's love. Tell her that. My little maid's fortune, with her daddy's love."

Then he shivered once—twice, and lay still, and old Ned was alone in the hut, with the tinful of worthless stones beside him.

THE LITTLE MAID'S FIND

THE rays of the late afternoon sun came softly through the trees, which cast long, long shadows on the ground, and fell on a strange and unusual group of men gathered together in a little natural clearing, which was ringed round with a wall of timber and scrub, which served to cut it off from the surrounding bush, making of it a place apart, as if Nature herself had designed it for such a purpose as that for which it was now being used. All around the great trees lifted their heads far into the upper air, while down amongst their huge feet the undergrowth was thick and undisturbed by the foot of man; for the place was far from towns, and men seldom came there save a stray wanderer; and bountiful Nature, as if anxious to preserve the solitude of the place, set herself to quickly hide the traces of his passage through, or residence in, this spot, until with ferns and leaves all marks were hidden, and the silence of the bush reigned there supreme. The trees were so tall that on this afternoon their shadows stretched right across the little clearing, save where through a gap in the wall of timber the sunlight streamed in, making what seemed like a golden pathway in contrast to the dark shadows all round.

It was in the midst of this pathway of light that the

little group of men was gathered. Bronzed and bearded most of them, with brawny muscular arms that told of hard work, they were seekers for gold from a small mining camp near by, known as Black Gully, where they sought for the precious metal for the most part but with poor results.

But it was not in search of gold that they had come to this little clearing, and now stood in a group with bared heads, while one, the oldest of them all, read from a little book in his hand. A very different matter than the search for wealth had brought them there, and kept them quiet and somewhat awed, while the voice of the reader alone broke the silence.

“‘In the midst of life we are in death. Of whom may we seek for succour but of Thee, O Lord, who for our sins art justly displeased’”? he read. And the men heard it and understood well, for two days before the mate whom they were now burying had been strong and well as they were, and then had been suddenly struck down by a fall of earth in his claim, even as one of them might be struck down and killed to-morrow. They thought of it now, as the reader paused while the rude coffin was lowered into the grave prepared for it; but to-morrow they must go back to work, and it would be forgotten until the next time they stood beside an open grave and saw the dead body of a mate lowered into its last resting place.

Each man knew what his neighbour was thinking of, but gave no sign as the reader resumed the service.

“‘Forasmuch as it hath pleased Almighty God of His great mercy to take unto Himself the soul of our dear brother here departed.’”

Here and there in the group a man cleared his throat, but for the most part they did not give even this faint

indication of emotion. One had unconsciously replaced his hat, and now, becoming aware of what he had done, hastily removed it again, glancing around shamefacedly to see if he had been observed; but all eyes were fixed either on the reader or the grave, and his action passed unnoticed.

Presently it was over, and with muttered remarks to one another the men began to disperse. Some gave a last look into the grave, while others tramped silently away, lighting their pipes as they went, until the place was deserted, save for two of the younger diggers, who were filling in the grave, and the old man who had read the burial service. He watched them in silence until the work was finished, and then, with a nod of approval, he let them depart together while he sat down on an old stump a few yards away from the newly-made grave, and, slowly filling and lighting his pipe, seemed lost in thought.

Old Ned—for so he was known amongst the other diggers—had been at Black Gully longer than most, and was in many respects a sort of unofficial boss of the small settlement. He had a mate known as “the Dutchman,” and the two lived together in one of the largest and best huts in the gully. It was he, too, who had known the dead man better than anyone else. In fact, he was the only one who had known anything at all about him; and it was how he was to fulfil his last wish that the old man was now considering. It was a curious story, and may be told briefly in a few words.

Some three months previously the dead man had arrived at Black Gully, and proceeded to fossick for gold. He had made friends with no one but old Ned, to whom he had told his story. He had a little daughter in Melbourne, he said, and it was in the hope of making a fortune for her that he had come out in search of gold.

His manner was always peculiar, and one day he had come to old Ned with the news that he had found a pocket full of nuggets and offered them for the old digger's inspection. They turned out to be no more than worthless lumps of yellow stone, though their finder from long brooding on a chimerical hope and a brain weakened by trouble and excesses, imagined them to be lumps of the precious metal. It was while old Ned was trying to make up his mind how to undeceive him that the man—he had been known in Black Gully as "the stranger"—met with his death by a fall of earth in his claim. He had lived just long enough to solemnly commit the worthless lumps of earth to the old man's charge, calling them "his little maid's fortune," and exacting a promise that they should be faithfully applied for the child's benefit, as all she had to depend on in the world. Then he had died in the full belief that he had left behind him a fortune for his little maid, while old Ned was left to speculate on how he was to fulfil the dead man's wishes, when all the little maid's fortune was a few lumps of worthless stone.

No one else on the diggings knew all the story, and the old man felt a curious reluctance to tell it. Yet something must be done for the child. The dead man had left a few papers behind him, and from them Ned gathered that if money were not soon sent for the child's support she might be turned away from her present home and left to the charge of anyone willing to have her. Money to send old Ned had none beyond a few pounds put by in case of illness; but he could not leave the child alone and unprovided for, though how he was to assist her puzzled him greatly.

At last, as it was getting dark, he rose from the stump on which he had been sitting, and knocked the ashes

from his pipe, which had long ago gone out, and started homewards.

"I'll talk it over with the Dutchman to-night," he said to himself as his hut came in sight. "If there's no other way I'll bring her up here to live with me until she's older and more able to look after herself. Only I'm afraid that won't suit Dutchy; he ain't over fond of kids now, and I'd be sorry to part with him, for we've been mates a long time now."

Conversation with the Dutchman was at all times a difficult and one-sided affair, for he was not much given to talking. And so old Ned found it that evening when, after tea, he placed some of the facts before his mate, and asked for his opinion and advice. Dutchy listened to all Ned had to say, but made no answer, unless a very deep growl could be considered one.

"What do you think, mate?" asked old Ned, when more indirect methods had failed to elicit any reply.

"It aren't my funeral," was the response.

"But we must do something. We can't let the little one——"

"Why can't we?" the other interrupted. "It's no business of ours that I can see. None o' mine, any road."

"And you won't help me, then?"

"What do you want to do?"

"There's only one thing I can do. Bring the little thing here and look after her, since I've got no money to send her."

"Then I'll clear out of this kypsie," answered the Dutchman. "I'll go over to the stranger's hut, and you can do what you like here."

In this way it had been arranged, and they parted. Old Ned went down to town, and in a couple of days returned with the little maid. The people with whom she

had been left did not want her now there was no money for her support. His return created no little excitement in the gully, for the Dutchman had so far departed from his usual taciturnity as to tell old Dinny of what Ned was about to do. Dinny had soon noised it abroad, and on the first evening after his return Ned's hut—always a meeting place for the miners—was fairly besieged by the men anxious to get a glimpse at the little maid.

She was a little, dark-haired thing, with great, solemn black eyes that looked out wonderingly at this new life she had come into, in which everything was so strange and different to what she had been used to. She was very silent that first evening, sitting on a stool at one side of the great open fireplace which took up one end of the hut, and watching intently all that went on around her. Now and then her eyes filled with tears, for it had been necessary for old Ned to tell her why she must now come and live with him in this strange new place. She had begun to call him Uncle Ned from the first, and quickly struck up a warm friendship with her new protector.

Bedtime that evening had brought the first problem which the old miner had overlooked in making his plans.

"I must say my prayers now, Uncle Ned," the child had said when she was ready for sleep.

"Do you say them every night, little one?" he asked, helplessly, not knowing how to proceed.

"Of course!" she answered, gravely, somewhat scandalised that an omission should have been considered possible. "God would be very angry with me if I forgot. Only sometimes I make them a little shorter if I am very, very tired. But that doesn't matter, you know, because God knows that little girls are very tired sometimes."

"Of course!" echoed old Ned, gravely.

"You must sit down here, then," went on the child with

innocent confidence, "so that I can lean on your knee while I say them."

The old man sat down as directed, and the child knelt at his knee, and clasping her baby hands together, began, "Our Father!" But something troubled her, and she ceased and looked up.

"Uncle Ned, you mustn't smoke while I'm saying my prayers. It would be very wicked, and daddy never did."

Ned removed his pipe, and laid it down on the box beside him, and again the child's face was hidden in her hands. But there was to be another interruption before the prayers were said.

"You must say 'Amen' with me at the end," she said, "or they wouldn't be proper prayers. The amens are very, very important. Now I think that's all, so I'll begin."

This time the prayers were finished without interruption, and the worn, rugged old man, who had spent his life in mining camp and shearing shed, knowing little of the gentler and more beautiful side of life, sat there with the little child at his knee, listening as she offered up her childish petitions to the Great Father, and hearing himself prayed for at the end, for the first time in all his sixty years. It was a new and somewhat trying experience—so much so that he forgot all about the part he was to take until a pair of reproachful eyes reminded him, and he uttered a couple of loud amens.

"You shouldn't have said it twice, Uncle Ned," said his small mentor, rising to her feet. "But you will remember to-morrow night, won't you?"

The old man promised, and sat long by the fire before turning into his own bunk. Already the responsibilities he had assumed began to take proportions unexpected as they were alarming, and he began to wonder if it would

not have been wiser to have left this little one to other hands, more skilled in the management of children. But already the little maid was making a place for herself in his heart, and there in his rude hut he determined to do his best to fulfil the promise given under such strange circumstances to the dead man.

But many of the difficulties receded as soon as they were faced, for the little maid was evidently used to looking after herself, and in a few days was quite at home in her new surroundings, and instructed the old man in all duties it was necessary he should perform for her. And one of these duties was that he should read to her as they sat together when the day's work was over. She had demanded this on the second evening of her new life.

"Please read me a story, Uncle Ned," she had asked in her imperious childish way.

The old man had gazed at her helplessly and scratched his head in his perplexity.

"But I haven't any books, little one," he had said. "Shall I tell you one instead?"

"That would be very nice," she answered, carefully weighing the proposition in her mind. "But I think I would like it best if you read it out of a book."

"What one would you like?" he asked, more to gain time than with any hope of being able to satisfy her.

"I think I should like the one about Daniel and the lions," she said after consideration.

"But isn't that in the Bible?"

"Of course it is," with surprise. "I am afraid you are dreffully ignorant, Uncle Ned, but," with a sigh, "please read it to me, and I can tell you where you go wrong."

"I suppose I am ignorant, little one," he answered, searching amongst his belongings for the Bible that had lain there undisturbed for many years.

"Wouldn't you like to read it to yourself?" he asked, when the book was found; and so the child had seated herself beside him, and together they had gone over the old story of Daniel and many another besides, interspersed with her innocent comments and questions, which Ned was often sorely puzzled to answer.

Gradually these readings became an event of almost nightly occurrence, occasionally varied by a story from old Ned, to which she always listened with an absorbing interest.

In a few weeks she had quite settled down to her new life, and wandered about the camp during the day at her own sweet will. Every hut and tent was to her an object of absorbing interest, and it was long before she tired of examining their contents, to which the owners never thought of offering any objection. In fact, there was only one man in the gully with whom she was not soon on intimate terms. This was old Ned's erstwhile mate, the Dutchman. He had taken up his quarters in the hut left vacant by the little maid's father, and thither the child had never ventured since her first visit, when she had been met with such a stern rebuff that she ran back to old Ned's hut much frightened, and confided to him that she had seen the devil. This had led to a quarrel between the two men, and they separated to work on different claims.

But with all the other men she was a privileged person, and laid one and all under contribution to minister to her childish wants; and never did she have to ask in vain. Perfectly impartial in her favours, she would wander from one claim to another, and seating herself on a pile of earth, converse with the man at the windlass or peep fearfully down the black mouth of the shaft.

Few of the men were particular about their language

on ordinary occasions, but most of them tried to moderate it when the child was by. The one exception to this rule was old Dinny, whose figures of speech were lurid in their intensity. But he met with a stern rebuke at the hands of this small autocrat, the account of which was repeated with no small mirth in every hut in the camp.

She had been watching him break up some wash in his trough, when, by a mischance, he broke the paddle with which he was working, and burst into a string of oaths at the accident. She listened in silence until the outburst had subsided, and then administered her rebuke.

"You are a very naughty old man," she said, severely, preparing to move off. "I believe you are wickeder than the devil, damn me if I don't; and I won't talk to you any more until you say you are sorry," and with this she left him.

It must be explained that "damn" was a word old Ned sometimes used, and since in her scheme of things he could do no wrong, the child used it in her rebuke to Dinny, and saw no incongruity therein.

Shortly after this Dinny was confined to his hut for several days by a severe attack of rheumatism, and, hearing of this, the little maid's resentment vanished, and she appeared one day at his hut with the Bible under her arm, and announced her intention of reading to him. It may be doubted whether Dinny received much benefit from this religious exercise, but anyway it served to heal the breach between them, and perhaps led him to make an effort to modify his language when in her presence, if at no other time.

But of all her occupations she liked best to watch old Ned when he was panning off, and would clap her small hands in delight when he showed her the fine gold lying

amongst the black sand at the bottom of the dish. Under the old man's superintendence she essayed the task herself, and achieved a certain skill in it as time went on.

And so for a time they were very happy together, and Ned never regretted his endeavour to fulfil the dead man's last wish. The little maid had gradually made a place for herself in his heart, which had never known the love of wife and child of his own; and that was sufficient reward for what he had done.

But there came a day when old Ned was sick, and could not go to work as usual, and then all the woman lying latent in the child came to the front and showed itself. Once she was assured that Uncle Ned was too ill to get up, she proceeded to do all the old man's early morning tasks. At imminent danger to her hair, which always hung about her head in waves, she lighted the fire, and when that was done put on the billy to boil, and made the tea. Ned watched her from his bunk, and the words of praise he uttered made her eyes sparkle. Then she tidied up the hut, and as it was the day for getting provisions from the store, she wrote down on a piece of paper, at Ned's dictation, what was needed, and, with the money to pay for it, went in search of someone to do her errand.

Close to the hut she met old Dinny, and as a sign of her renewed favour she gave him the money and bit of paper, with instructions what to do. He did not go himself, but sent someone else, which did as well.

And now there were many opportunities for the little maid to show the stuff that was in her, for the old miner did not recover quickly, and there were many days when he could not go to work at all, and other days when, after an hour's vain effort, he had to return to his hut and lie down in his bunk. Gradually the child took all

the simple household duties on her own shoulders, and performed them in a manner worthy of one far older. Offers of help came when it was known that Ned was ill, but he refused them all save the weekly message to the store, and strove to make light of his illness.

But for all that he could not throw it off, and the work suffered in consequence. The child was happy in her work, liking it better than roaming about, and when Ned was well enough to sit by the fire and smoke his pipe she was satisfied, and had no thought for further trouble.

So matters went on for some weeks, until one morning, when the order for the store was made out as usual, and Tom Hester, the miner, who generally took it, was waiting, the old man discovered that his little stock of money was exhausted, and that there was none to pay for the goods. There was no gold either, and so nothing remained but to ask for credit at the store, and this, which was gladly given, staved off matters for a time.

The next day the old man went to work, but returned in an hour or so, and the following week credit had again to be asked for. Had he cared to ask for assistance, the other miners would have gladly supplied it; but he kept his need to himself, and tried to hide even from the little maid the sore straits they were in.

But though she said nothing, she knew the money bag was empty, and her small mind was continually exercised on how to fill it.

At last one day came the crisis, and Tom Hester, on returning from his visit to the store, announced that Bourke would not allow any more credit.

"I've got a bit that you're welcome to, mate," said Tom; but the old man shook his head in token of refusal, and turned his face away that the other might not see it.

"Thanks, mate," he said. "But I'll be all right again by next week, and able to earn something."

But the little maid had heard him say this before, and began to doubt it. That night at bedtime she unfolded a proposition which had been occupying her small mind.

"Uncle Ned," she said, "I'm going to ask God to help us."

"Are you, little one?" he answered. "I'm afraid it won't be of any use, though."

"Oh, but I'm sure it will," she persisted. "I'm going to ask him now, so mind you say Amen at the end. I won't ask him anything else to-night but just that, and then to-morrow I'll try that wash you couldn't pan off, and you'll see he will send us something good."

Outside a man had his hand on the door latch, but he paused as he heard the childish voice uttering a petition so strange.

"Oh, God!" she said. "You know Uncle Ned is sick, and can't go to work, and that we have no more money to buy food. Oh, God, I'm going to work to-morrow instead of him, so please let me find some gold. You know how much we want it, God, so please send a big, big lump. Amen."

The voice ceased, and the man in the darkness outside stole quietly away.

The next morning after breakfast, true to her promise, the little maid set out for Ned's claim. She waved a cheerful good-bye, and the old man watched her go with tears in his eyes. Someone else was watching her too, whom she did not see, so intent was she on what was before her. On the claim she found the small pile of wash-dirt which Ned had been unable to pan off. There was a dish already half full of it, and taking this

up she went to the tub of water where the washing off was done. "A big lump, please, God," she murmured, and set to work.

Eyes of which she was unconscious were still watching her, but all her energies were centred on the dish where the gravelly wash was gradually disappearing under the soft lap of the water, leaving nothing in the dish but the black sand, and underneath that the gold. Presently she tipped the dish back as she had often seen old Ned do, and there amongst the sand and gravel lay a big rough lump of shining gold.

"Oh, God!" she gasped; "I knew you would send it." Then grasping the precious piece in her hand, she dropped the dish and set off at the top of her speed for the hut.

"Uncle Ned! Uncle Ned!" she gasped, bursting in on the old man. "God sent it. I told you He would. Look!"

The old man drew her to him. "God sent it, sure enough, little one," he said, looking over her shoulder at the Dutchman who was standing by, though the child had not noticed him. "But there's no need for you to work any more now. This piece will last a long time, and Dutchy and I are going to be mates again, so things will be all right, dear."

The child looked round, but the Dutchman was gone, though the precious lump of gold remained.

"Wasn't it good of God to send it when I asked Him?" she said, for the twentieth time that evening, when bed-time had come.

The old man nodded and kissed her. Then, happy in her faith, which had been so abundantly proved that day, she fell asleep, never doubting as to where the gold had come from.

But the Dutchman knew.

OLD NED'S ACCOUNT

THERE was a new storekeeper at Bourke's—the third within twelve months—and old Bourke, the owner of the store, gave a grunt of satisfaction when she arrived, and hoped he would at last have relief from the worries of conducting a business which was beyond his strength. He liked to sit at his little table in a corner of the store room, with his pestle and mortar and scales before him, carefully weighing out and buying the gold which the miners from the Black Gully diggings brought in to sell. But lately, owing to the inability and laziness of his storekeepers, he had been forced to take a more active part in the business than he relished, for he was an old man, and suffered much from rheumatism. For years all the business of the store had been taken off his hands by his storekeeper, known throughout all the district as Liza, of Bourke's. But Liza had been killed in a street accident in Melbourne, and since then, without her firm, controlling hand, things had only gone tolerably, until the old man began to consider the advisability of retiring from the business before his savings were all swallowed up. He had tried two male storekeepers since Liza's time, and both had been rank failures—quarrelling with some of the diggers, and letting others run up long scores which were never likely

to be paid. Then, in despair, he had decided on trying another woman as a last resource. And thus it came about that one afternoon Mrs. Cook and her belongings arrived at Bourke's by waggon, and the old man gave a grunt of satisfaction, for she was strong and capable-looking, and he began to anticipate an easy time ahead.

The new storekeeper did not belie her appearance, and in a very short space of time things began to run more smoothly. But she had ways and ideas of her own, and it was not long before she gave the old man a horrible shock by announcing that she must have a boy to help her with the heavy lifting, and to drive the waggon in and out of the township whence fresh stores were procured.

"A boy!" he gasped, leaning up against a case to support himself. "I'll have no boys about here. The others did without boys."

"And a nice state they left things in, I'm sure", sniffed Mrs. Cook.

"I was thinking of Liza," he answered. "She was here over twelve year, and never once asked for a boy in all that time."

"And she died," said the new storekeeper, with an effort at sarcasm. "However, that isn't my way of doing things."

"But the expense," wailed Bourke. "The profits are very small, and they won't stand it."

"Then we'll make them bigger," she answered. "But I must have a boy to help me."

And so, yielding to superior force, the old man consented, and in due course the boy arrived. It was a good investment, as he soon found out, and before three months were passed old Bourke's only fear was that his new storekeeper might find the place too lonely, and want to leave.

But the new storekeeper was better satisfied with her place than she intended to show her employer. The life suited her, and in a little while she became friendly with most of the diggers, this last not being a matter of any great difficulty, for they were for the most part easy-going men, anxious to be friendly, for they never knew how soon a spell of bad luck might force them to apply for credit, and in such a case it would be awkward to be on bad terms with the storekeeper.

It was Tom Hester who had driven her out from the township on her arrival, and it was to him she naturally turned for information regarding the inhabitants of the place, and Tom, only too glad to be of use, gave her a full and particular account of each and every one of them.

"Tell me more of this man you call old Ned," she asked. The others had not interested her much apart from the amount she found standing opposite their names in the store books. "You say he has a little girl living with him. How does that come about?"

Tom was leaning across one end of the store-room counter, watching the "Missus," as she soon came to be called, bustling about and arranging things to her liking.

"Well, you see, it was this way," he began. "There was a chap here we used to call 'The Stranger,' 'cos he never knowed anybody but old Ned. And one day there was a fall of mullock in his claim, and he was underneath it. We dug him out, but he was done for, and died shortly afterwards, having got old Ned to promise to look after his little girl."

"And old Ned kept his promise, eh?"

"You don't know him, or you wouldn't need to ask that," answered Tom, with something like enthusiasm. "I don't think old Ned could break a promise if he tried."

"What sort of a claim has he got?"

"Oh, not so bad as claims about here go," was the reply. "And, besides, he can always peg out a new one if he wants to."

"Perhaps he's getting too old to work it?" suggested Mrs. Cook.

"Well, now, that's more than likely," admitted Tom, as if such a thing had never occurred to him before.

"Of course, he's mates with the Dutchman; still, I don't think he does any too well."

"He doesn't order any too much to eat."

"I know that. I generally get his stuff for him, and most of that is for 'the little maid,' as he calls her."

"Doesn't he ever come into the store now?"

Tom shook his head. "Don't think he could walk so far," he said. "His hut's a good three mile off."

"Then bring the little one in with you some day, Tom, I should like to see her."

"Right you are, missus. I must be off now, but I'll bring her next time I come."

And Tom Hester was as good as his word, bringing old Ned's little maid—for so she was known amongst the diggers—with him the next time he visited the store. The little one did not suffer from shyness, and Mrs. Cook's motherly heart went out to her, so that in a little time the two became great friends. The woman encouraged the child to talk about old Ned, and this was a subject on which the little maid could wax eloquent at all times. Her remembrance of her father was getting vaguer as time went on; of her mother she had no recollection at all; and the old digger had gradually come to stand towards her in the place of both parents.

As time went on she came more and more often to

the store, sometimes spending the whole day there, watching Mrs. Cook as she went about her work, asking questions which the other was never tired of answering, and occasionally, under superintendence, being allowed to measure out pounds of sugar, tea, or flour. In the evening she was generally sent home in the care of the store boy, unless Tom Hester were there to take charge of her; and it was seldom that she returned without something to supplement the meagre supplies which old Ned's slender earnings allowed him to purchase.

And well it was for both the old man and little girl that they had such a friend at hand to help them, for the old digger's earnings were getting smaller and smaller, while the amount which he owed at the store grew at an alarming rate. Indeed his credit there would have been stopped long before but for Mrs. Cook's intervention with her employer. It was old Bourke's custom to make his storekeeper read out to him about once a month the names of those diggers who owed him money and the amount of their debts. He would then issue his orders as to whether the account was to be allowed to run on, or, as was often the case, no more goods supplied until the amount owing was reduced.

For several months whenever this calling over came round, Mrs. Cook omitted to read out old Ned's name, and the amount he owed, along with the other debtors. The old man's story had stirred her sympathetic heart, and all the motherliness that was in her went out to the little girl, so lonely and so in need of a mother. She had children of her own, but they were grown up now, and needed her care no longer; and so her heart yearned over this little one with all the strength of mother love. So she kept silent as to the amount old Ned owed, trusting that luck might favour him, and en-

able him to pay his debt before old Bourke discovered it and refused further credit.

But her well-intentioned scheme proved in vain. His two previous storekeepers had made Bourke suspicious, and one day, on returning to the store after an absence of about half an hour, she found her employer carefully going over the books on his own account to see if she were cheating him. He looked up sharply as she entered, keeping one withered, trembling old hand resting on the page which he had been carefully scanning, and with his small bright eyes twinkling greedily, asked—

“Just look at this account, missus, will you?”

Striving to appear unconcerned, she walked over and gazed on the page at which he was pointing, though even before she saw it she knew it was old Ned's account he had discovered.

The old man watched her carefully, but she did not speak; she was trying to think of some plan.

“You never told me he owed so much,” he said presently, half angrily, half querulously.

“No,” she answered.

“Why not?” he demanded. “You will ruin me if you do this sort of thing. I am an old man, and poor. He must be made to pay.”

“He is an old man, too; older and poorer than you are,” she answered. “And, besides, he has a little girl to support.”

“I can't help that,” he broke in, fretfully. “The money is owing to me, and I must have it. Tell him that, and don't give him any more goods until he pays what he owes.”

“I can't do that.”

“But I say you must.”

“Then he and the child will starve.”

"And won't I have to starve, too, if I go on giving my money away like this?" There was something fretful in the old man's voice as he spoke; in fact, it was more like that of a spoiled child than anything else. "I am an old man now, a very old man, and I don't want to end my days in a benevolent asylum."

"It wouldn't cost you much to keep old Ned from going to one."

"Why do you care what becomes of him?" asked old Bourke. "He is nothing to you."

"It's the little girl I think about most."

"Ah, yes! The little maid." He seemed to ponder over this for some time, then he looked up sharply, and said, "I'll tell you what, missus, bring the little one to live here. She reminds me of my own little maid, dead this twenty year. She's a quiet little thing, and if she was living here Ned would not have to support her, and so could pay back what he owes me."

For a moment Mrs. Cook could make no reply, the proposition was so surprising. She had always tried to keep the child as much out of the old man's way as possible, lest he should object to her frequent visits to the store, and now to have him suggest that she should make it her home took her breath away. But her heart leapt with pleasure at the thought of having the little one always with her.

"I doubt if old Ned would let her come," she said, doubtfully. "He's very fond of her and she of him."

"But if he can't support her he must let her go to those who can," protested Bourke, who, having got the idea into his brain, seemed strangely eager to carry it out. "You arrange it, missus, and we'll have the little one here to live with us. She won't cost much to keep if you are careful, and by-and-bye when she grows bigger

she could help you with the work, and we could do away with that boy. I always hated boys." This last idea pleased him so well that it put him into quite a good humour, and he agreed to let old Ned's account stand over for a time if his plans were carried out.

But Mrs. Cook had no intention of placing the matter before old Ned in this way. She knew well, from what she had heard of the old man, that to suggest parting with his little maid that he himself might benefit would be worse than useless. She must represent that it was for the child's benefit entirely, and this without hurting the old digger's feelings as to his capability for protecting and supporting her. She feared a difficult, if not hopeless task, but after all it turned out much less difficult than she had supposed.

For old Ned was not blind to the fact that he was getting old, and that his strength was failing. True, his partnership with the Dutchman, who was a younger and stronger man, enabled him to work his claim with some little profit, but as the days were many when he could not go to work, it was an unequal partnership, and likely to end at any moment. And so the thought of what was to happen to the little maid when he was no longer able to work and provide for her, perhaps not even able to provide for himself, cost him many anxious hours.

Bourke's new storekeeper was no stranger to him by repute, though he had never set eyes on her until the day on which she appeared at his hut to make her proposal. The child had talked of her to him; Tom Hester, too, had had something to say, and old Ned guessed that it was owing to her his account at the store had been allowed to run on for so long. So he received her in a friendly way, though dreading to hear what had

now brought her to see him. No idea of the real state of affairs dawned on him until Mrs. Cook had unfolded old Bourke's plan in her own way—a very different plan, indeed, from Bourke's, and one not likely to hurt Ned's feelings.

He turned it over in his own mind, puffing slowly at his pipe the while.

"Did you ever have a little maid of your own, missus?" he asked at last.

She nodded. "Three. One died about this little one's age."

"Then you know what it feels like to part with one?"

Again she nodded, but made no other reply, and the old man mused again.

"It'll be terrible hard to part with her now," he said, partly to himself and partly to the woman who was waiting to hear what his answer would be, "but I doubt not that it'll be for her good to let her go. This here is no place for her to stop in much longer now. She'll be a young woman soon."

The other said nothing, only waited.

"You'll let her come to see me sometimes if I give her to you, won't you?" he asked. "I couldn't do without her altogether, you know."

There was a pleading note in the old man's voice, and the other responded to it quickly.

"Of course, and you will often come to the store and see her there," she answered.

But old Ned shook his head.

"I shan't often get along there now," he said. "It's getting too long a journey for my old legs. But if you'd let her come along here now and again, so that she won't quite forget me, I'll thank you kindly, and be glad to know she's got a home and a good woman to look after her."

And so it came about that one day shortly afterwards the little maid left for her new home, and the old digger had his hut to himself. He found the evenings very long and lonely, for lately his hut had ceased to be the general meeting place it had once been, but he comforted himself with the thought that the child was provided for far better than it would have been within his power to compass.

Old Bourke was pleased, too, and for the present, at any rate, made no mention of Ned's debt, and allowed Mrs. Cook to supply him with goods.

How much the little maid understood of the new arrangement, and why it was made, it would be difficult to say. Her natural grief at leaving the old man, who had been so good to her, was soon forgotten in the interests of her new life, and as she was a privileged person at the store, this was scarcely to be wondered at. And so things went on very smoothly for a time, until old Bourke, unable to reconcile himself to the fact that Ned's account was gradually growing larger and larger, ruffled them by a peremptory demand that it should be settled in full. In vain did Mrs. Cook reason and remonstrate; the old man stood firm. Ned was to be supplied with no more goods until what he owed was paid. But just at this moment the little maid took part in the discussion. How she had arrived at her knowledge of the facts neither of them knew, but that she had a pretty fair idea of what was the matter they soon discovered by the way she spoke.

"You are a nasty old man," she said, addressing the owner of the store, who was sitting at his own little table, where he carefully weighed out and bought the gold brought in by the diggers. "If you won't give my Uncle Ned what he wants, I shall go back and live with him."

"Go away, go away," said the old man in his petulant way, waving one thin old hand in her direction.

But she was not to be so easily dismissed, and stamping one small foot in anger, she fairly shrieked at him.

"Do you hear what I say?" she cried. "I will go away from you, you nasty old man. I will go back to Uncle Ned, and live with him, and —" she paused for some threat to lend emphasis to her words, when suddenly her roving eye fell on the shallow broad-necked bottle in which the old man kept his fine gold. At sight of it a sudden idea took her, and seizing the bottle before a hand could be put out to stop her, she whisked it off the table, and was standing in the outer doorway before old Bourke had sufficiently recovered from his surprise to stop her. "I will take your gold with me" she cried in triumph. "I will take it with me; you will not like that, and I will throw it into the creek."

She made a movement as if to put her threat into execution, and at sight of it the miserly old man nearly went mad with fear.

"Stop her! Stop her!" he shrieked to Mrs. Cook. His rheumatism was very bad that day, and he could scarcely move. "She has got my gold, and she will throw it into the creek, all my beautiful gold, and I shall be ruined."

This was rather an exaggeration, seeing that the bottle contained little more than half an ounce; but the thought of any loss drove him into a frenzy.

"Then promise not to be cruel to my Uncle Ned," replied the child from the doorway.

"Stop her! Stop her! My gold! My gold!" was all the reply the old man could make.

Mrs. Cook stood passive, not knowing what to do, when suddenly there was a sound of hasty footsteps out-

side, and Tom Hester entered hurriedly, big with news that prevented him from noticing the dramatic situation he was breaking in upon.

"I say, missus," he began, "old Ned—" and then noticing the presence of the child he stopped, and seemed uncertain how to proceed.

"What is it?" she asked, turning towards him, while Bourke stopped his cry of "My gold! My gold!" to listen.

"Old Ned's been took bad, terrible bad," was the reply, "and he wants to see the little one before it's too late. You'll have to hurry if you want to be there in time."

The child heard, and, only half understanding, turned a puzzled face up to the motherly woman who had thrown her arms round her.

"Come, dear," she said, taking the bottle of gold from the little one's now unresisting hand. "Uncle Ned wants you. We must go quick."

Passively the child obeyed her, and in a few minutes more, while old Bourke was gloating over his recovered treasure, they were hurrying along the bush track in the direction of the dying man's hut.

Presently it came in sight. Two or three men were standing round the open door, and these drew back as they approached.

"Too late, missus," said one of them, and instinctively the woman put out her hand to stay the child; but the little maid sprang past her into the hut, with a cry of "Uncle Ned! Uncle Ned!" unheard by the old digger, whose ears were fast closed to all mortal sounds, and who had gone to settle his account with a juster creditor than old Bourke.

TOLD BY MISTAKE

THE Swan Reach District Hospital lay baking in the fierce glare of the afternoon sun. The thermometer in the shade of the broad verandah which ran round the whole building registered 112 deg., and this was about the coolest place for some miles around.

Outside, what had once been the hospital garden was now a bare, dusty waste, utterly devoid of flowers or plants; the only green things being a few trees, which struggled bravely for an existence, though the leaves were dry and hard, and they gave little shade. Outside the garden was the broad road, and beyond that again bare brown paddocks, where great cracks like so many thirsty mouths longing for rain, showed in the parched earth. And beyond the paddocks was the town, the buildings of which looked intensely white in the glare, their iron roofs, steely blue, reflecting back the sun's almost vertical rays like huge mirrors. No one was stirring either on the road or in the paddocks, where the cattle were lying down in any scanty shade they could find. The main street of the town was also deserted. It might have been abandoned by its inhabitants—like some Australian Moscow—for any sign they gave of life. If by chance a figure appeared it was almost more like a

ghost than a human being as it flitted along in the glaring sunshine, and presently disappeared into the interior of some building, where at least it would be darker, even if not much cooler, leaving the place as deserted-looking as before.

Everyone was resting, or trying to, for the flies made this almost impossible, though even they were not as active as usual. Up at the hospital it was very quiet. The patients, lying in bed, and finding even a sheet too heavy a covering, spent their time fanning themselves and trying to doze. One of them was light-headed with fever, and kept up a low, indistinct muttering, only now and then rising into any semblance of coherent speech.

"A cloud," he muttered, turning wearily from side to side in an almost unconscious effort to obtain ease of body. "A cloud. Even a little one, the size of a man's hand," and then, after a moment's silence, "How long, oh, God! How long!"

The nurse sitting beside him paused in her work of fanning him to rearrange the sheet, which he had tossed off in his uneasy movements, and to smooth his pillows; then she took up the fan again and commenced as before.

It was weary, mechanical work, and she almost dozed off as she sat there. Her patient was not very interesting—a thin, wizened, oldish man. But then she was getting used to uninteresting patients, for in all her five years of nursing she had only come across one whom she took a real interest in tending.

Ah! but that one had made up for all the rest, and through him her life as a nurse was nearly finished, and soon she was to enter on a very different one as the wife of the man she loved. In a few weeks at the furthest she would leave this hospital, with its heat and dust and work, that was day by day becoming more distasteful,

and go down to the capital, there to marry Gordon Brown, whom she had nursed through a serious illness some three years before.

Theirs had been a somewhat long engagement; but then, Gordon had been poor at the time, and it was only lately that he had come in for some money which had necessitated his taking a trip to England. But he would soon return now, and then they were to be married immediately. Had those not been almost Gordon's last words six months before, when she said good-bye to him at the wharf?

"A cloud! A little cloud!" muttered the patient again, and she bent forward to soothe him, as she would have wished some other nurse to soothe the man she loved if he were ill and she could not be with him.

"I will watch him now, nurse, for a little while," said another nurse, coming into the ward. "Matron is having tea in her room, and says she has a cup for you. There's nothing like tea to keep you going this hot weather."

The new comer sat down by the sick man and took up the fan, while Nurse Freeda Ross, with a little sigh of relief, left the ward, and, leaning up against a verandah post outside, shaded her eyes with one hand and gazed down the broad road, which led away, away into the far distance until it was lost to sight in the blue, smoky haze that hung on the horizon.

"The road that leads to Gordon and happiness," she mused. "Oh! I should like to start now and walk and walk until I reached him. But, oh, how stupid I should be," she went on, with a little laugh, "when the train would take me down in a few hours. But I should like to feel that I was doing something to get nearer to Gordon, no matter how slowly. Oh, if he would only come driving along that road now, and stop at the gate and say, 'Freeda, darling, I have come for you.'"

Through the smoky blue haze, and at first scarcely distinguishable from it, appeared a cloud of dust. "Sheep," thought the girl, and turned to go inside, for even under that broad verandah the glare was almost insufferable. But at the door she turned again, for the beat of horses' feet at a gallop could plainly be heard approaching. It must be something out of the ordinary to make anybody gallop his horse in such heat. Somebody for the doctor most likely. So she waited, and watched the horseman approach, leaving a long cloud of dust behind him, which hung heavily in the air like the trail of smoke from a steamer. She could recognise him now. It was the mounted constable of the district, and then in a moment more he was pulling up his horse at the gate and calling to her.

"Is the doctor in, nurse? There's been an accident along the road there by the bridge. Man and woman in a motor, regular smash up, both badly hurt. They are bringing them in now," and he waved his hand back in the direction in which he had come to where the girl could now see a cart slowly approaching; while behind it, drawn by a horse, came the wreck of a motor car.

"I'll call him, constable," she answered, and sped away to the doctor's quarters.

"An accident! God bless my soul! Why couldn't they choose a cool day," said that individual, springing up from his chair. "Call the matron, nurse, and see that the theatre is ready in case we want it," and he hurried out to superintend the removal of the injured man and woman from the cart.

With swift hands Nurse Freeda prepared what she thought might be needed in the theatre, and then came the sound of footsteps on the verandah, and the wardsmen and constable entered, bearing on a stretcher the

body of a man, his head bound up with rough bandages, so that it was almost impossible to see any but the lower part of his face; while his body had the horribly inert, flaccid look that speaks so eloquently of crushed bones. Behind them came the doctor and matron.

"Take the other to No. 4, Barnes," said the matron to the wardsman, "and then come back here."

"Shall I send Nurse Walker to her?" asked the man.

"No need to," answered the doctor. "We can't do anything for her. She's dead. Broken neck. Now let's see what's wrong here," and he turned to the injured man, who had been placed on the operating table, and began to undo the blood-stained bandages from his head.

"Halloa, nurse. You are not going to play up, I hope," he exclaimed, flashing round on her. "If you can't stand it send Nurse Walker here and stay outside. I can't have you turning sick at the sight of a bit of blood."

"I'm sorry," she began, recovering herself with a great effort, for at the sight of the man's terribly injured head she had almost screamed, and had spilled some of the water in the basin she was holding.

But it was not the mere injuries, terrible as they were, which had upset her, for she had seen many such and never blenched. It was that in the poor, disfigured, torn face, with its gaping wounds, she had recognised the face of her lover—Gordon Brown. For a moment everything around her seemed to disappear, and a great darkness to envelop her; then at the sound of the doctor's sharp words she braced herself up to go through this terrible ordeal.

With almost incredible rapidity thoughts passed through her brain. She must not tell them this man was her lover, or they would not let her nurse him. And she must do that; oh, yes, she must do that, for who

could tend him so well as she who loved him so dearly? And so she forced herself to look again at the poor injured face that she loved, and to bear her part calmly in the terrible work the doctor was doing.

"Terrible smash up," he said, while his skilled hands sped about their work. "Though I've seen worse in my time—seen worse. Wonder who he is?"

"The dead woman was his sister, so the constable said," answered the matron.

"Ah. I've done with that now, nurse. Hand me those dressings."

And so the work went on, human skill doing all in its poor power to save human life, while Nurse Freeda stood by, helping, outwardly calm, but inwardly convulsed with emotions she could scarcely control. It seemed an interminable period to her before the doctor was finished, and the injured man carried from the theatre and placed in bed in a room by himself. She longed to ask if he would live, but feared to trust her voice.

"If he has any friends they ought to be wired for," said the doctor.

"Will he die?" asked the matron.

"I'm afraid he has not much chance."

"If he regains consciousness and asks for his sister?"

"H'm! That will be awkward, but you must put him off some way or other."

"He is not to be told she is dead?"

"Not on any account. It would spoil any chance he has. If he asks for her you must put him off any way you can. He must not hear it until he is stronger. You understand that, nurse. I leave it all to you," and the doctor walked off towards his quarters.

With a terrible numb feeling at her heart and brain, Nurse Freeda prepared to watch her patient and lover.

He was still quite unconscious. One arm was broken, and lay strapped across his chest, and his head was bandaged up so that his eyes and forehead were quite hidden.

At last she was alone with him, and with a little moan she let her head drop on the pillow beside his, and cried, "Oh, Gordon! Gordon!" But the man could not hear her, and after a little while she lifted her head again, and determined to be strong.

"At least I can nurse him," she told herself. "No one can take that right from me, and he is mine, mine."

Slowly the time passed, and save for a brief visit from the doctor she was alone with him. Outside the sun was beginning to sink in a blaze of splendour, but the heat seemed to remain as great as ever. The man on the bed moved, and muttered incoherently, and the girl, who had a moment before gone to the door of the room, which opened on to the verandah, for a breath of air, hurried back to his side. He had lifted his uninjured hand to his face, and was trying to remove the bandages which covered his eyes.

"Don't touch your bandages," she said, in a low, distinct voice, and repeated the sentence over several times, until its sound and sense seemed to penetrate to his dulled brain, and he let his hand drop back on the bed.

Another half-hour passed, and then all at once he spoke.

"Where am I?"

"You are in bed," she answered, in a low voice, so steady that she marvelled at it.

"Why? What is the matter with me?"

"You met with an accident—were thrown out of your motor car."

He seemed to ponder over this for some time, and then spoke again.

"Ah, yes! I seem to remember now. How long ago was it?"

"Only this afternoon."

"What time is it now?"

"Eight o'clock. But you must not talk—you must keep very quiet, the doctor says."

"Ah, yes! They always say that sort of thing, don't they? But I want to know things, and I can't quite remember. Tell me, was I alone when the accident happened?"

"No; your sister was with you."

"Yes, of course; I remember now. Is she hurt?"

For a moment the girl paused, and then, lying bravely, answered, "No!"

"I am glad of that, for I'm afraid that I'm very much smashed up indeed."

Again he paused, and seemed to be thinking over things, while the girl watched him with dry, tearless eyes.

"I must see her," he said presently.

"Not just now," she answered. "She is resting, and you are to keep very quiet, or you will not get well."

"As if it mattered," he said. "I can feel, or rather, I can tell, by the absence of feeling that I am smashed up all over, and I don't want to live on a cripple."

"Send my sister to me," he went on, peremptorily, in a minute or two, and the girl rose and walked out into the verandah. It was almost more than she could bear, having to sit quietly by, and not be able to tell her lover who she was. And yet she could not leave him to another nurse. Oh, if he could only see and find out for himself.

Presently she returned, and the man moved his bandaged face towards her. "Well?" he said, questioningly.

"She is resting now. When she wakes I will tell her."

"Don't let it be too long, then," he said, and turned his face away.

Five minutes passed, and then he turned again, and asked suddenly.

"Who are you?"

"I am the nurse," she answered.

"Ah, yes! But your voice reminds me of someone I knew once—a nurse, too—but it can't be, of course," and he broke off to ask again for his sister.

Another hour passed in silence. Outside it was dark, and the nurse rose and lighted a night lamp, while the man on the bed moved his head restlessly from side to side, and muttered to himself. Presently the doctor came, but the man was unconscious again. After a brief examination he turned to go.

"Keep him quiet, nurse. It's all you can do. He is sinking. But tell him nothing; it's no use."

She was alone again, and the night wore on. Once she whispered softly, "Gordon!" and the man stirred. His uninjured arm was lying on the sheet next to her, and very gently she laid one of her hands on his. The touch seemed to arouse him, and he spoke.

"Is that you, Margaret?" and his fingers closed on her hand. "The nurse told me you would come when you had rested."

She realised at once that he was only half-conscious, and took her for his sister, and yet she hesitated to tell him of his mistake. In a moment he was speaking again.

"I'm done for, my dear," he said. "And there is something I must tell you while I have time. Bend down close. Are we alone?"

The girl shivered. It seemed a traitorous part to act, and yet—and yet, who loved him better than she, or had a better right to hear his confidences. If she could only

tell him who she was! She would tell him presently, but not now—not now. And so she put her head down close to his, and answered.

“There is no one but you and me, dear?”

“Then listen,” he said. “Do you remember Freeda Ross, who nursed me when I was ill three years ago? I told you afterwards that there was nothing between us. I lied to you. There was. I had asked her to be my wife, and she had consented.”

A warning as of approaching danger seemed to come to the girl, but she only whispered, “Yes, dear. Go on,” and the man continued.

“I thought I loved her, and before leaving for England arranged that we were to be married immediately I returned. But in England I met another girl, and after a little found out that I loved her better than Freeda; and dear—ah, don’t draw your hand away—I married her, Margaret.”

There was a bitter stifled cry from the girl, and the man’s hand was wandering helplessly about the sheet in search of hers.

“Margaret!” he whispered. “Give me your hand again. It was wrong, I know, but you must hear me, and do what I want, now that I am dying.”

He turned his bandaged face towards hers, but he could not see the white, drawn look on her face or the bitter despair in her eyes.

“Margaret!” he said again. “Why should you care so?”

A terrible struggle was taking place in the girl. Surely never before had woman been in such a position. Oh that she had not heard this terrible confession from his lips, this confession which was not meant for her ears, but another’s. And he was dying, dying fast. If only

he had gone without speaking, without telling of his faithlessness, and she could have believed he had loved her to the last. But he was married to some girl in England, and loved her no longer. Could she let him die, go from her for ever, and not tell him that it was she who was nursing him? God help her! What should she do? Then she turned and saw his hand wandering over the sheet in search of hers, and his poor bandaged face turned upwards in a vain endeavour to see.

"Margaret," he said. "Margaret! Give me your hand again, and listen before it is too late."

One last struggle, and then she put her hand again in his and listened.

"She does not know I have returned," he went on. "It was only business brought me back, and I had intended leaving again without seeing her. It was cowardly, I know, but I am being punished for it now. You must find out her address, for I have lost it, and go to see her."

The listening girl shivered. It was almost too horrible to be borne, this unconscious confession to the woman he had wronged. But again she mastered herself, and asked a question.

"What am I to tell her?" she said. "Do you wish her to know all you have told me?"

"No, no; not that," he answered, and she had to bend low to hear his words. "She need not know I have been faithless; must never know. Do you understand, Margaret? You must tell her I was going to her when I met with this accident. I want her to think well of me. I could not bear that she should know me as I am. Promise me, Margaret, to do this, and never to let either Freeda or my wife know the truth."

He was sinking fast now, and his hold of her hand

relaxed, while the girl, with fixed, stony eyes, gazed down at him, the man she loved. Then all her strength was mustered up in one last effort.

"I promise, dear," she said. "Your wife shall never hear this from me."

"And Freeda?" he asked faintly.

"She would forgive you, Gordon."

"Ah. But she must not know," he persisted. "Promise me, promise me, Margaret."

"I can't, Gordon," she sobbed.

With a supreme effort he raised himself in the bed. Something in her voice had penetrated into his fast failing senses, and startled him. She released his hand for a moment to support him, and in that moment his free hand was at the bandages on his head, striving to tear them off. She saw what he would do, and strove to prevent him. "I promise, Gordon, I promise," she cried. But it was too late, the bandages were moved, and he saw her.

"My God," he cried. "You, Freeda; you."

In her endeavour to prevent him removing the bandages from his face she had ceased to support him, and thus for a moment he remained, staring at her with a dazed horror in his eyes, while she stared back at him, unable to speak. Then—

"It was a lie, Freeda. All a lie," he cried. "I only did it to try you, dear. I was true—I swear."

For one brief instant his eyes looked into hers, and he saw she did not believe him. Then without a sound he fell back on the bed—dead, while the girl, after one shuddering glance at his still form, fled from the room and out into the silent night.

A BUSH HEZEKIAH

SCHOOL was over for the day at the little State School of Linfield, and the tired female teacher, with a sigh of relief and weariness, for the day had been a long and trying one, watched her little flock of pupils disperse on their several ways homeward. There were not many of them, for the school was in a sparsely-populated district, and in a minute or so all the children had disappeared save one little maid of about nine or ten, who trudged sturdily along the track through the bush with a bag of books in one hand and a bundle of wild flowers in the other, to which she made additions whenever a suitable flower caught her wide-open light blue eyes.

She was a fair little maid, with sunny wind-tossed hair, and ever and anon she sang little snatches of songs to herself as she walked along or stooped to pluck some new flower for her nosegay. They were a poor lot enough as flowers go, but to her they seemed everything that could be desired, for she was not a bush child, and had only been in Linfield for a few months.

Presently, a little way from the track, she caught sight of some red berries, and to her small soul they appeared the most desirable things on earth, even worth the risk of venturing off the track a few yards into the bush, a

thing she had never done before when alone, and perhaps seeing or even treading upon a snake. She shivered at the thought, but the berries were so very red and tempting, and were after all so close, that very carefully looking out for snakes and other unknown dangers, she ventured in and gained the coveted berries. Growing bolder she began to gaze about, and saw not far off a small bark hut among the trees, and close by an old man, who appeared to be chopping wood. Of snakes she certainly was afraid, and even of cows, if their horns were very long and sharp; but in all her small life she had never been afraid of a man, and so she approached him very softly, and stood watching for some time in silence, until at last curiosity overpowered her, and she asked,

"If you please, will you tell me what you are doing?"

The old man had been so intent over his work that he had not noticed her, and with a start he turned and gazed at his small questioner in surprise. She looked back at him with wide open, fearless eyes, and presently repeated her question, as he appeared to have forgotten it.

"Splitting palings," he answered, spitting into the palm of one hand and then rubbing it reflectively on the leg of his trousers, but never taking his eyes off the child.

"It must be very hard work," she said. "May I sit on this log and watch you for a little while? I can arrange my flowers at the same time."

The old man resumed his work, while the child watched and arranged her flowers.

"Do you live all alone in that little house?" she asked, when her nosegay was finished.

"Ay. Me and Skratch," he answered, pausing for a spell.

"Who is Skratch, please?"

The old man whistled, and a terrier with only one eye and half an ear scampered up.

"He ain't a beauty—leastways, most people don't think so—but we've seen a sight of life together, have Skratch and I. Eh, boy!"

The dog sat up and gave a knowing look.

"I think he is very nice," said the child. "Please tell me a story of your life—a real true one, I mean."

"You's better be getting home," said the man, a sudden surliness coming into his manner, which, however, was quite lost on the child.

She sprang up.

"Oh!" she cried. "I had almost forgotten. It was so nice sitting here talking to you. May I come again soon and see your dear little house and make friends with Skratch?"

"All right," he answered. "Only don't you go bringing any other children with you, or I'll——," and he paused to invent a threat awful enough, while she watched him with wide open, expectant eyes. "I'll eat them," he finished up with solemnity.

She burst into a merry peal of laughter.

"Good-bye, then, Mr. Wolf," she cried, and danced away, turning to wave her hand in adieu before the trees hid her from sight.

The man watched her until she disappeared, and then slowly and thoughtfully set about preparing his evening meal. "Eh, Skratch, boy!" he said once to the terrier, "what do you think of it?" But the dog only watched his master's movements more intently than before, and looked very wise with his remnant of an ear cocked expectantly above his blind eye.

The next day was wet, and she did not appear, but the day after she burst out on him with a merry laugh

from behind a tree, and the old man suddenly became aware that he had looked for her, and would have been disappointed if she had not come. But it was not in his nature to show this. He had lived too long alone with only a dog for company to be free of speech, and it was some time before the child's merry prattle drew any answer from him.

"May I look into your dear little house?" she asked, and on his giving an assent, she entered the hut and examined everything it contained with the greatest interest.

"Why, you've got a Bible!" she cried, unearthing a copy of that venerable book from among a mass of odds and ends. "How nice it must be to have that and be able to read it when you are all alone here at night with only Skcratch to keep you company. You need never be afraid then."

The old man took the book from her hand, and, turning it over, gazed at it curiously. But he did not look inside. Then he placed it on a rude shelf, but not where it had been before.

"Come outside," he said. "I've got a young rabbit with a broken leg that Skcratch caught this morning. I thought you might like to have it."

"Oh!" cried the child, and in a minute more she had the wounded rabbit in her arms, stroking its soft fur while Skcratch looked up expectantly at what he very rightly considered his legitimate prey.

"You haven't told me your name yet, you know," she said, when it was time to say good-bye, and the rabbit was curled up in her luncheon basket. "I think it's nice to know the names of one's friends. Mine is Beatrice, but mother always calls me Trissie."

"You'd better call me Mr. Skcratch," answered the old

man. "It arn't just what I was christened, but I've had so many names that doesn't matter much."

"Have you?" she said, in surprise.

He nodded, and then, with a great effort—

"Come again, if you like."

"Good-bye, then, Mr. Skcratch," she cried. "I'll come again soon, and tell you how the rabbit is."

The old man sat long by his lonely fireside that evening, and smoked many pipes in meditative silence. Evidently he was pondering some question deeply, and from time to time he glanced at the dog, who lay curled up comfortably at his feet, winking his one eye lazily at the firelight, and said, "Eh, boy! What do you think?" as if expecting an answer to his inquiry. Once he got up and took down the Bible from where he had put it, and laying it open on his knee, gazed curiously at the pages, with the strange look that is only seen on the faces of those who cannot read. After looking at the printed page for some time he sighed deeply and shook his head.

"I'm too old to learn now," he muttered. "And yet I expect to the little one it's as plain as plain." From a pocket in the cover he then drew a letter, and scanned the name and address on the unopened envelope. "I know what's writ here at any rate, eh, Skcratch, boy!" he said, and the dog looked up at the sound of his name. "Hezekiah Hopkins, that's me, and it must be that what's writ here, or how would the bloke at the post-office have known who to give it to. But what's writ inside is what I want to know, and yet I can't trust any of them to read it to me. They might read it wrong, and then what should I do? Besides, they might talk, and I don't want anyone coming here; I want to be alone. The little one now, she could read it, I expect, and yet—and yet"—his speech trailed off, and he gazed into the fire as if for

inspiration. Finally he put the letter back in its place, and laid the Bible on the shelf.

Next day when the child appeared as usual she was full of news of the rabbit. The old man stopped his work to listen to her, and when she was finished, he began.

"Can you read?" he asked.

"Of course!" she answered with scorn at such a foolish question. "Can't you?"

He shook his head in a decided negative.

"Never learned as a boy, and I'm too old now. Sixty-five ain't much of an age to be learning one's letters, so I reckon I'll do without for the rest of my time anyhow."

She gazed at him in surprise and some pity.

"I don't mean print," he went on, "but what's wrote with a pen you know."

"Oh!" said the child. This was another matter altogether, and she was not so sure of her ground.

"Can't, eh?" said the old man, with a disappointed look, seeing that she hesitated.

"Let me see it first!" she cried. "I can read some people's writing, only they sometimes make their letters in such a funny way, not a bit like the letters in our copy books at school."

Very slowly the old man drew the still unopened letter from his pocket, and held it up so that the child could see the name and address on the envelope.

"Can you read what's writ there?" he asked, with a knowing look.

"I think I can if you will only hold it a little nearer," she answered.

He advanced the letter about two inches nearer her face, keeping a tight hold of it all the time.

"Why, that's quite easy!" she cried, triumphantly, for it was in a large, round handwriting.

"What is it then?" he asked.

"Mr. Hezekiah Hopkins, Post Office, Linfield," she answered, and looked up at him for approval. "That's a name out of the Bible," she went on. "Hezekiah I mean; he was a king, you know."

The old man nodded gravely.

"Ay, that's right," he said, replacing the letter in his pocket.

"But don't you want to know what's inside?" she asked, elated at her success, and eager for further conquest.

"I don't know as I do," he answered. "Not to-day, at any rate. Isn't it time you were getting home?"

"I suppose it is," answered the child, a little disappointed. "Good-bye, Mr. Skratch."

"Good-bye," he replied. "Come again soon. I might want you to read something else to me."

She came again, and he made no further mention of the letter, but presented her with a young magpie he had found. But though he did not speak of it to her, the letter was always in his thoughts, and one afternoon he again showed her the still unopened letter, with a request that she should read the address.

"Why, that's the same letter you showed me before," she cried in disgust.

"Is it now?" he said, looking at it in badly assumed surprise. "But you see, you haven't read me what's writ inside it yet, you know."

"I can't, Mr. Skratch, unless you give it to me and let me open it."

"Very well, then," handing the letter to her reluctantly, and looking as if half inclined to snatch it back once it was out of his possession. "Be sure and read me what's writ inside and nothing else," he added, with the suspicion that is born of ignorance.

"Why, of course, I will," she answered, and began.

It was not a long letter, and was written in the same large round hand in which the envelope was addressed, so that the child was able to read it easily enough. The old man stood close beside her, listening intently to every word, and watching the small forefinger that pointed to where she was reading. When it was finished she looked up in some perplexity.

"What a funny letter, Mr. Skratch. I don't understand it at all. Do you?"

He was silent for a minute or two, and did not seem aware of her presence, or rather to have forgotten it, until she gently touched one of his wrinkled, toil-worn hands, and repeated her question.

"Do you understand it, Mr. Skratch? You look sorry. Is something the matter?"

He started and gazed down at her.

"Read it through again, little one," he said, with a strange new tone in his voice, and the child obediently read through the curious letter once more while the old man sat close by and listened.

"I want to get it fixed aright in my mind," he said when she had finished. "So that when you are not here to read it to me I can go over it by myself."

"Shall I read it again?" she asked, and as he nodded, she read it through for the third time, and then the old man took it from her and put it back into his pocket.

"I've got it most by heart now," he said. "You had better run away home and forget all about it."

She ran off obediently, and when she was out of sight the old man took the letter out again and scanned it line by line. He repeated this process later on in the evening, when he and Skratch were alone by the fireside, but it did not seem to give him much satisfaction. "Eh,

Skratch, boy!" he muttered more than once, and the dog, seeing that his master was uneasy, whined in sympathy.

The child came next day as usual, but the old man was silent, and scarcely answered her merry prattle. She left him earlier than usual, but the following day, finding him still silent and worried-looking, she ventured on a question.

"Is that funny letter worrying you, Mr. Skratch?" she asked. "You look as if you were sorry for something."

"So I am," he answered, not pausing in his work.

"I'm so sorry. Can I do anything for you?"

"No one can do anything for me, little one," he answered. "It's my own fault, but I don't rightly know what to do. That letter you read me is a bit of a puzzler."

"Yes! I couldn't understand it a bit," she agreed, with a very serious look in her blue eyes.

"I understand it all right, but I don't know what to do for all that."

"Tell me about it, Mr. Skratch?"

"I can't tell you much, my child, but I will tell you what I can; it may help me to decide."

So the child sat very still while the old man, holding one of her small hands in his, told her of a chapter in his life which he would willingly have kept closed for ever. She listened, for it was better to her than the very best fairy tale ever invented, for it was really true. When it was finished she heaved a long sigh.

"Do you understand it, my dear?" he asked.

"I think I do, Mr. Skratch," she answered, looking up at him. "The letter was to tell you that a poor man was going to be punished for something you did."

"That's so. And I've got to decide whether I'll tell them it was I who did it. He never will if I don't."

"Oh, Mr. Skratch, tell them, and say you are sorry—you are sorry, arn't you?—and then it will be all right, won't it?"

"I'm afraid not. You see, they'd want to punish me then."

"And would it hurt much?"

"A fairish bit, I expect."

"But you can't let the other poor old man be punished for what you did; it would hurt him, too, you know."

"I suppose it would, my child, but it is hard to give up your liberty, for all that."

The child sighed. It seemed a very hard question to settle, and she watched her companion in anxiety, with her small brain working actively all the time. Suddenly she sprang up with a cry.

"Oh, Mr. Skratch! I know what you must do."

"What, my dear?" he asked, turning towards her.

"You remember when I read you that letter I said there was a King in the Bible with the same name. Hezekiah, I mean."

"Was there?" muttered the old man, with his thoughts far away.

"Yes! And now comes the wonderful part of it, Mr. Skratch. Please listen, and then you will know what to do."

"I'm listening, my dear."

"This King Hezekiah got a letter from a man called Sennacherib, and he was like you when he read it, for he didn't know what to do."

"And what did he do?" asked the old man, whose interest was somewhat aroused.

"He went ———" she began, and then, "Oh, Mr. Skratch, let me get your Bible, and then I can read you the whole story. I'm sure it would help you to decide."

She was off towards the hut before he could prevent her, and presently returned with the Bible.

"I think I can find the place, because I read it to mother the other day," she said, and then sitting down on a log she began to turn over the leaves while the old man watched her in curious silence. It took her some time, but at last she was successful.

"Now listen carefully, Mr. Skratch," she began, "and then when you have heard what King Hezekiah did, you will know just what to do." And so with the worn, old bushman sitting beside her on the log, with his head resting on one hand, and Skratch sitting close by with his tattered ear cocked up all attention, the child read the grand old story of an ancient King's faith in God and the answer to his prayer.

"And Hezekiah received the letter of the hand of the messengers, and read it, and Hezekiah went up into the house of the Lord, and spread it before the Lord.

"And Hezekiah prayed before the Lord, and said, O Lord God of Israel, which dwellest between the cherubims, Thou art the God, even Thou alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth, Thou hast made heaven and earth.'"

When it was finished she marked the place, so that it would be easy to find it again, and then carefully closed the book.

"Were you listening, Mr. Skratch?" she asked.

"Aye, little one. I was listening all right."

"Then don't you think you ought to do the same thing with your letter that King Hezekiah did? If you show it to God, He is sure to tell you what you ought to do."

"I'm thinking that I know what I ought to do, right enough, my child; it's the doing it is the trouble," he answered, slowly.

"It is very hard to be good sometimes," she assented,

with a sigh. "But, see, Mr. Skratch, I have put a marker in the place so that you can easily find it if you want it. Now I must be going home, or mother will think I am lost. Good-bye. I will tell God all about your letter to-night when I say my prayers, and ask Him to help you."

She tripped away, and turned at the usual spot to wave her good-bye. But the old man never saw it; he was too busy thinking.

That night, alone in his hut, but for the dog, the old man opened his Bible at the marked place, and gazed at the print that conveyed so little to him. Perhaps he had never before in his life prayed until that night, and the words came with difficulty. But who will dare say they were not understood, or that the act of prayer did not help him in his decision.

Anyhow, when the child came the next afternoon, his mind was made up.

"I'm going away for a bit," he told her when she was saying good-bye.

"Did you tell God about the letter, Mr. Skratch?" she asked.

He nodded.

"Then I'm sure He won't let them punish you if you say you are sorry," with intense conviction.

"Perhaps not," he said, to comfort her.

"Will you take Skratch with you?" she asked.

"Ay! Skratch and I have never been parted yet," he answered. "It's too late to start that now, eh, boy!" and the dog answered in his own dumb way.

"Good-bye, then, Mr. Skratch, and come back soon," she said. "I shall pass here every day, and keep a look-out for you."

"Good-bye, my little maid," he said, and his voice

was husky. "Don't forget all about me, and perhaps some day I may come back again."

"I will pray for you every night, dear Mr. Skratch," she said, and held up her innocent face that he might kiss it.

He stooped and kissed her, with a muttered "God bless you, child," and then she tripped away, while the old man watched her with dim eyes until she waved a last good-bye and disappeared among the trees. Then he turned and entered his hut.

The next day, when the child passed that way, and looked for Mr. Skratch, she found the hut shut up and deserted. The old man had gone to answer his letter in person.

HIS LITTLE FRIEND

A LONG, long, hot, dusty, country road that seemed to stretch from horizon to horizon, bounded on each side by wide, sun-burnt paddocks, with here and there a few cattle or a mob of sheep, the latter wandering hither and thither in search of grass and the cattle standing or lying in the shade of the few trees that here and there broke the dull monotony of the plain. Up above in a sky of burning blue, unrelieved by any specks of cloud, the sun was blazing down, for it was noon, while on the horizon hung a faint blue haze that told of bush fires in the distance, only waiting for a wind to spring up, when the destroying element would sweep fiercely across the grass paddocks, leaving death and desolation behind. But just now there was no wind, and the dust hung heavily in the air behind the footsteps of an old man who was plodding slowly and wearily along the road. His was the only human figure in sight, and he had come slowly out of one dim distance and would slowly disappear into the other, leaving nothing behind him but some footsteps in the dust.

He was little and old, and the swag that he carried, though small, looked too heavy for him. But there was a strange light of determination in his faded blue eyes, that spoke of a purpose he was set on accomplish-

ing, and which gave strength to his tired feet as they carried him northward, ever northward, along the road which stretched out in front until it was lost in the distant haze.

But he was not quite alone, one faithful friend accompanied him, and from time to time, in his own dumb way, looked up in encouragement, as if to say, "Cheer up, we will soon be there."

This companion was an old fox terrier dog, blind in one eye, and with only half an ear. No beauty certainly, but with one of the faithfullest hearts that ever beat. He was not playful either, for the days of his puppyhood were long since past. In those long-vanished days, when he and his master had travelled the country together in search of work, he had been wont to scamper on ahead, and then wait impatiently until his master came up. Every rabbit that ran across the road had been something to chase, and even the birds, when they flew low, had seemed fair sport. So he had scampered about in the mere delight of living, and no day or journey had ever seemed too long.

But now all this was changed. He was getting old like his master, and was content to trot quietly along by his side, paying no attention to rabbits, but occasionally glancing up at the old man's face as if for the sake of companionship.

They understood one another thoroughly, these two, with the understanding that is born of long and close association, and whenever the dog looked up, the man always replied with, "Eh, Skcratch, boy!" and the other wagged his stump of a tail as answer.

The sun was very hot, and they had travelled many miles since morning, but now it was time for the midday spell. There was no shade to be got within reasonable

distance of the road, and so the old man sat down with his back against a fence post, while the dog Skcratch sat up expectantly watching for any preparation for dinner.

But for a while the old man seemed to have forgotten it was meal time, and it was not until the dog in his own way reminded him, that he produced some bread and meat from his swag, which they shared between them. There was cold tea also, but this the dog did not share, and then the old man lit his pipe, while Skcratch curled himself up for a sleep.

Three days before this pair had left Melbourne to tramp northwards with a very definite purpose in view on the part of the man; the dog was content to follow his master wherever he went, and asked no questions.

Two years before they had lived together in a small hut, the man earning a living by splitting palings. He had made up his mind to give up the wandering life, and end his days there. But fate had ruled it otherwise. News had come to him that an old mate was about to suffer for a crime which he himself had committed, and then came a hard struggle, perhaps the hardest in a not over easy life, before he could decide what to do. He had known that his mate would not split on him, would sooner suffer the penalty of a crime he had not committed, and in face of the certain immunity from detection it had been very hard to confess the crime his, and give up the freedom which had never seemed so valuable before until he was in danger of losing it. Perhaps he never would have decided at all, but just left things drift, had it not been that help came to him in a peculiar way. A little maid of nine or ten had been in the habit of passing his hut on her way home from school, and gradually, very gradually the old man had got to look for her and long for her coming. It had pleased him to

listen to her childish talk, and if a day passed and she did not appear he was disappointed. Then a letter had come for him, and as he could not read it, he had, after much hesitation, got the little child to read it to him. It contained the news about his mate, and then came the problem what he was to do. Go on as before, and let another suffer for him, or give himself up and go to gaol for his crime. For days he had struggled to decide, and then in a burst of confidence he had told the little maid all, and she had helped him to a decision. Her innocent faith had put him on the right road, and he had said good-bye to her, closed up his hut, and with his dog *Skratch* for company had journeyed down to Melbourne and given himself up. The result had been a sentence of two years' imprisonment, which he had served, buoyed up by the determination that when it was over, and he was once more free, he would go back to his old hut and take up the quiet life again. He had never doubted that this would be possible, and that the child on her way home from school would stop as she used to do, and lighten his lonely life with her childish talk. She had promised to look out for his return, and he never doubted her. It had given him strength and patience during the long, weary days of imprisonment to think of this, and now he was free once more, and on his way back to the fulfilment of his hopes. Only three days before had the prison gates opened to let him out a free man, and then he had wasted no time, but set out on his long journey back with his dog *Skratch* for company.

But the confinement of prison life had not suited him after the open air existence he had always been used to, and so his progress was slow, and he often felt weak and

tired. Only the thought that now all his hopes were to be fulfilled helped him along towards his goal.

Now he sat with his back to the fence post, the dog at his feet, and thought of all this as he watched the smoke from his pipe hang in the still, hot air. The dog opened one eye to see if there were any preparations for departure, and closed it again when he saw none. The old man was tired, and dropped off to sleep, while the sun blazed down from above. Gradually the shadows cast by the fence posts grew longer and longer, and by the time the man awoke they reached nearly half-way across the road.

"Eh, boy!" he said to the dog, who had been sitting watching him. "You should have woke me. We've been wasting time. It's a long road, Scratch, and we can't travel as fast as we used to, you and I."

The dog looked as if he understood, and watched his master gather up his swag and billy. Then they started off once more towards the faint blue haze in the distance, while the dust hung behind them in a long trail.

It was dark before they camped for the night, and after the meal was over the old man sat long by the fire smoking and dreaming of the child who to himself he called his little maid.

Thus for five days these two tramped slowly and steadily along with their faces always turned in the same direction, the one with a hope in his heart, the other with an unquestioning faith in the wisdom of his master. And late on the evening of the fifth day they reached their destination, the little township from which they had set out more than two years before. They did not go down the main street, for the old man was not anxious that everybody should immediately know of his return. His wish was to reach the old hut unseen, and

take up his life as before, so that when the little maid passed on her way home from school she should find him there as if he had never been away.

So they struck across some paddocks into timber country, and that night dog and man slept once more in the old hut. It was somewhat delapidated and weather-worn, and the first couple of days were occupied in patching it up; then he set to work once more at the paling splitting, for he would let people find out gradually that he had returned, and not go into the township except for food, of which he had brought enough with him to last for several days.

Every afternoon he watched anxiously to see if the little maid would pass along the track. He had brought her a simple present from Melbourne, and he always had it near him to give her when she should come. Only she never came. Many days passed, and the old man's eyes got tired of gazing down the track in search of a childish figure which should appear through the trees, stand for a moment in surprise, and then dash towards him with a cry of "Oh, Mr. Skratch! I am so glad to see you back again," for that was what she had always called him.

It was only now, when he was disappointed at her non-appearance, that he became aware of how much he had built on seeing the child again. For two long weary years the thought of her had been constantly with him, and all his plans for the future quiet life in which he was to end his days had centred round this one little girlish figure, this child who, in her innocence, had put him on the right road in a time of great trouble.

At night, alone in his hut save for the dog, he would reach a Bible down from a shelf, and with it open on his knees sit gazing for hours at the printed page which

he could not read. But he liked to look at it, for it was from this book the little maid had read to him when he had been in doubt what to do, and what she had read helped him to decide. It was necessary for him to visit the township now and then to obtain food and other supplies, and on these visits he was always in hopes of seeing her. But he never did so. Other children in plenty were playing about, but not the little one he so longed to see.

From long living alone he had become very silent and reserved, and though he was so anxious to hear of the child, he could not bring himself to ask anyone about her. His love for her was a thing to be kept secret, not to be spoken of on any account, and he feared the curious looks and possible questions that would follow any inquiries he might make. Skratch, the dog, was his only confidant, and to him the old man would sometimes say, "Eh, Skratch, boy! She doesn't come, lad. What are we to do?" and the dog answered in his own dumb way, but this did not help matters much.

And so the days went by, the old man eating out his heart in silence, speaking of his disappointment to no one. Perhaps he never would have spoken at all had not chance thrown a better opportunity than usual in his way.

His hut was about a hundred yards off a seldom-used bush track, and the few passers-by there did not often stop to speak to the paling splitter, his reputation for silence being well known. But one day the local blacksmith was passing, and leaving the track, came up and spoke to the old man. For some time he did not get much encouragement to continue the conversation, but then, moved by some impulse he could not resist, Mr. Skratch—for so the child had always called him—be-

gan to ask about his little friend. He only knew her Christian name, and for some time the other could not guess of whom he was speaking. At last light broke in on him.

"Ah! You mean Jem Taylor's little girl?" he said.

"P'raps I do and p'raps I don't," answered Mr. Skratch, unwilling to commit himself. "Is she still here?"

"Ay! She's still here, but she won't be long, I'm thinking."

"Are they leaving here, then?" anxiously.

"The little one is, I'm afraid."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you see, it's this way, mate," said the blacksmith, slowly knocking the ashes out of his pipe against the log on which he was sitting, whilst Mr. Skratch tried to assume an air of unconcern. "You see, the little one has been ailing for some time on and off, and had to give up going to school. This fretted her terrible, and then she got a fever—typhoid, the doctors called it. That was two weeks ago, and they don't think she'll live through it."

The blacksmith stopped, and stood up to go, but his companion made no move.

"Good day, mate!" he said, after a moment, but Mr. Skratch did not seem to hear him, and after a curious look the blacksmith went slowly off homewards.

But the old man did not hear him go. He was sitting on a log—the same log on which the little maid used to sit arranging her bunches of wild flowers—and trying to grasp the news he had just received. The little maid was dying; his little maid, whom for the last two years he had lived in the hope of seeing again, and now he was to be disappointed. Skratch came up and looked

at his master, seeing that something was the matter, and then sat down to await developments.

It was evening before the old man moved, and then, instead of going inside his hut, and preparing the evening meal as usual, he pulled the door to, and set off towards the township, the dog following at his heels. On reaching the blacksmith's he inquired for Jem Taylor's house. It was easily found, standing somewhat apart from the others, and when he had found it the old man sat down with his back to the fence and waited.

All night long he sat there, scarcely moving at all, but with his eyes fixed on the windows of the room in which he fancied his little maid lay, for there was a light in it, and now and then the shadow of a figure on the blind. In the morning he was still there, and a woman coming from the house asked him if he wanted anything. He shook his head, but sat on as before, while people came and went, gazing at him curiously. Some one brought him food, and he mustered up courage to ask if he might see the little maid. Evidently he had not hoped, for he took the refusal very quietly, and when night came he was there still.

In the morning one came and beckoned him into the house, and he knew what the summons meant. With his old head bared he followed into the silent room, and looked upon the little maid for the last time; then he went back to his place by the fence and waited as before.

When the funeral left the next day he and Skcratch followed it from a distance to the quiet place of burial, and when it was over, and all had gone, the old man and the dog drew near to pay their last tribute to the memory of the little maid. Then they, too, left, and returned to the lonely hut by the bush track, and an old man's dream was over.

THE END OF THE ROAD

IN the township he was known as "the old mystery," and though he seldom left his hut out in the timber country, where he lived by splitting palings—except when necessity forced him to go in for provisions, or to make arrangements for selling his stock of palings—he and his dog Skratch, a one-eyed, lop-eared terrier, were well known by sight, and many curious eyes followed them whenever they appeared in the township.

But further than this very little was known of this strange pair, who lived alone, and seemed to prefer one another's society, for on these infrequent visits the old man spoke to no one unless forced to do so, and the dog trotted sedately along at his master's side, paying no attention to other dogs unless they approached too close, when he would show his teeth, warning of what might be expected if this unwarrantable familiarity were persisted in.

There had been one who had known and understood the old man. A little maid, who, fearing nothing, had been wont to stop at his hut on her way home from school, and talk to him. They had struck up a strange friendship these two, and then suddenly the old man had disappeared from the district for a couple of years. Then he had returned only to find the little maid dying. It was on

this occasion he had paid his longest visit to the township, for he and the dog had sat down outside the house where the child lay dying, and had not moved or spoken to anyone until they had risen to follow the little coffin to its resting place in the cemetery. Since that day they had again returned to their solitary life, and shunned all communication with their neighbours, both human and canine.

No other child had ever mustered up courage to approach the lonely hut. They had gazed at it from the track as they passed, and perhaps paused a moment to watch the old man at his work, and this was all.

At times when no one else was there man and dog could sometimes be seen from afar off sitting by the little maid's grave in the cemetery; but they must have kept a keen look out, for at anyone's approach they always retired, anxious to preserve their solitude.

Whether or not he was conscious of the curiosity he excited it would be hard to say. Probably not, for as he took no interest in others, he might have expected them to take none in him.

At night he would sit by the fire in his hut with pipe in mouth and perhaps an open Bible on his knee. He could not read, and as often as not the book was upside down; but he liked to have it there, and to gaze at long intervals at the printed page which was such a mystery to him. For once the little maid had read to him out of that book, and ever since it had been precious for that reason.

It was a lonely life, but he had his dreams, though they were the saddest of all day dreams, those of an old man of what might have been. But they served him now, for they were almost all he had left of a long life, which since early manhood had been spent on the tramp.

In those early days there had always been in his mind the thought of a time when he should give up the wandering life and settle down in a little home of his own, with a wife, and, perhaps, children to make the place merry with their laughter. But the years had passed one by one, and that time never came. He could never give up the free, wandering life, for its hold was strong upon him. Not for him were the roof tree and hearth-stone, and the loving faces that make home; but the long, long white road and the broad open spaces, and at night the stars far above him in the deep purple sky. It was the *Wanderlust* that held him, and though he knew it by no such name, he was its willing slave, and from town to town and station to station he had passed, never staying long in one place, but ever journeying on and on, possessed by this spirit he could not understand, but obeyed unquestioningly, for it was the very breath of life to him.

Thus his life had been passed in mining camp and shearing shed, in shepherd's hut, or in his tent under the open sky, with his dog beside him, and the rest of his worldly possessions in the swag on his back, giving no thought to the morrow, and taking the rough or the smooth with a calm philosophy that was part of his nature.

Then at last he had built this little hut of bark, and settled down to split palings for the rest of his life. So at least he told himself, and for a time he had been content, made so by the presence of the little maid. But now she was gone, and the *Wanderlust* coming over him, he felt he must journey forth once more and take to the road again. He could not have explained it even to himself, but he felt he must go. It was as the call of voices he could not resist. The long road and the wide

open, solitary, spaces beckoned to him, and at night the stars seemed to draw him out and give him promise of their companionship on his solitary way.

It was all very vague, save that he felt he must go, and now as he sat in front of the fire with the open Bible on his knee, and Skratch lying at his feet winking his one eye in the rays of the firelight, his mind was made up.

"Eh, Skratch, boy! But you're getting over old to take to the road again," he said, and the dog sat up at the sound of his master's voice.

"I mind well," the old man went on, speaking to the dog as if the dumb beast could understand him, a habit contracted through their long and close companionship, "how it was your grandmother used to come with me when I was a young 'un. Eh! but she was a fine dog, Skratch, boy! Died of a snake bite she did—she was always terrible daring—but she chawed that snake up small first, though, and then she just came back and lay down at my feet and died. Eh! Skratch, but she was a fine dog that grandmother of yours, and that's a powerful sight of years ago."

The old man paused in his reminiscences, and the dog sat still, watching him, as if waiting to hear more. Presently he resumed—

"Then there was your mother, Skratch. Many a long day's tramp we've done together. But she was drowned out back o' Bourke in the only water for miles and miles, and that as thick as soup. Since then it's been you and I alone, boy, and a sight of roads we've travelled in our time. Eh?"

The dog made answer in his own dumb way, which the man understood as well as if he had spoken.

"I couldn't leave you behind, boy," he went on pre-

sently. "It's over late for us to think of parting at this time of day, and my old legs are scarcely likely to carry me too far for you, though you're growing old, Skratch, boy, growing old, like your master."

And so the matter was arranged between them. There were few preparations to make, for the hut contained little more than the bare necessities of life. What he did not need was just left behind, and one evening as it was growing dark the old man with his swag on his back came out of the hut for the last time, locked the door behind him, and with the dog at his heels, started towards the cemetery.

He had chosen the evening to leave, for he did not wish to be seen, and perhaps questioned. But there was one of whom he must take farewell.

"We must say good-bye to the little maid, Skratch, boy, case we don't come back again," he said. So they made their way to the grave and took a farewell each in his own way, then crossing some paddocks, they reached the great main road, and turning towards the north without even one backward look, set out once more on the tramp with the stars and the mysterious silent night for company.

.

"I can't go no further. Skratch, boy! Done at last, I'm afraid."

The dog stopped and looked at his master, who had sunk down on a pile of stones at the side of the road, and then sat down at his side. One place was much like another to him; so that his only friend was there, he cared for nothing else.

It was nearly six months since they had left the little hut, and taken to the road again. Six months of tramping about from one town to another, here and there

doing a day's work, then shouldering the swag, and off again, for the wandering spirit would not let him rest. But his strength had been growing less and less, and their daily tramps shorter, until now, when it wanted yet an hour to noon, the old man found it impossible to go any further and sank down.

They were many miles away from the only place they could by any possibility call home; but even now, weak and ill as he was, the old man's thoughts did not stray longingly in that direction. He had tramped for so long that the road was home to him, and he lay now with his back against the stones in the grateful warmth of the winter sunlight.

He had been too weak to put up his tent the previous night, and it had rained heavily in the early morning, making him cold and stiff. Now, however, the sun warmed him, and it was pleasant to lie there and rest, for he was very tired. Presently he fell asleep, while Skratz kept watch at his side until he, too, closed his one eye and slept, while the sun gradually sank towards the west and the shadows grew longer and longer. But the old man still slept heavily, his worn old face upturned to the sky, all unconscious of approaching night.

When he awoke at last it was morning again, and he was lying in the bottom of a cart which was going slowly along the road. He tried to sit up, but all his strength seemed to have gone.

"Mate!" he called to the man who was sitting in the front driving.

The man turned a kindly face towards him.

"Feeling better now?" he asked.

"Where's my dog?" said the old man.

"Oh, the dog! He's here safe enough," and he pointed with his whip to the side of the road where Skratz

was trotting along, now and then glancing anxiously towards the cart as if to see no harm came to his master.

"What did you put me here for?"

"Found you lying in the middle of the road," was the reply. "I'd have driven over you if it hadn't been for the dog barking."

"Where are you going to?"

"To the next town. I'll leave you at the hospital there, and they'll look after you for a bit until you're strong enough to get about again."

"The hospital! I don't want to go to no hospital. Think I'll get out and walk for a bit."

"Right you are! Try," answered the man, cheerfully, stopping his horse.

The old man tried, but failed to get on his feet.

"Reckon I'll have to go, mate," he admitted, after one or two ineffectual attempts. "Hospitals arn't so bad after all; I was in one years ago for a goodish bit."

The man nodded, and started his horse again, while the other sank back, and in a little while was once more unconscious.

When next he awoke they were outside a brick building, and his friend and another man were lifting him out of the cart.

"Is this the hospital?" he asked.

"Ay, mate," was the reply. "They'll soon put you to rights here."

"Where's my dog Skratch? He must come too."

"Can't have no dogs here," said the second man, attempting to drive Skratch away.

"Then you don't have me neither," cried the old man, making a desperate struggle to get on his feet and stand alone. "My dog and me ain't going to part company now after all these years for any bloomin' hospitals. Eh, Skratch, boy! We'll stick together. Come along!"

With a great effort he made a few unsteady steps away from the building, and then fell in a heap on the ground, while Skratch, with every tooth showing, stood by snarling at the men.

"Why don't you bring the man in?" and a neatly uniformed nurse hurried up, and bent over the old man tenderly, while Skratch at once ceased his snarling.

"He wants the dog to come, too."

"Well, let him come."

"Matron said she wouldn't have no dogs about the place," said the man, doubtfully.

"Carry him in at once," demanded the nurse, angrily. "Can't you see how ill he is? I'll arrange with matron about the dog. "It's none of your business."

And so the old man was carried inside, and laid on a bed in a large, clean ward, while Skratch followed closely to see no harm befell his master.

Once in bed between clean white sheets—the first time he had so lain for many, many years—the old man fell asleep again. The doctor came his rounds, and the nurse, true to her promise, told her story, and begged that the dog might be allowed to stay. So Skratch was accommodated with a box on the verandah outside, and allowed to pay his master frequent visits.

"You see, miss," said the old man to the nurse when he had been there a few days, and was feeling stronger and more at home, "we're very old friends are Skratch and I—eh, boy!—and we don't want to be parted like."

"I see," answered the nurse, sympathetically. "He's a good dog, too, though not much to look at."

"No, he ain't no beauty," assented his master. "But we don't set no store by looks, neither on us," and Skratch looked up as if he understood.

And so for several weeks man and dog were cared for

and tended in the country hospital, and then with some measure of returning strength the old man felt he must take to the road again. This life was all very well, but it was not for him. While he had strength he must be on the tramp. Houses were for others, but for him the wide, open spaces and the sky were the best surroundings, and they seemed to call him now louder than ever before. The *Wanderlust* was his master still, and he must journey forth again. He did not reason thus to himself; it was only a blind instinct which he could not but obey.

"But have you any home or friends to go to?" they asked him when he said he must leave.

"Well, not exactly," he answered. "But we'll be all right, Skratsh and I. We're used to looking after one another."

"But you might stay here a little longer, and then perhaps you could get in as a benevolent patient."

But this alarmed him; it seemed almost like being made a prisoner.

"I'd sooner go," he replied. "I'm plenty strong now, and will get along fine."

And so they let him go, seeing he was restless and anxious to be off, and one morning not quite a month after he had been brought in, he left the hospital, and with his swag on his back, faced the road again.

But now for the first time in his life Skratsh seemed to be in two minds about accompanying his master. He had spent most of his time in sleeping lately, and now perhaps the thought of long tramps and scanty meals did not attract him—anyway, when they reached the gate he stopped and looked back at the place they were leaving.

"Eh, Skratsh, boy! Come along," said the old man; but the dog only moved a few yards, and then paused again.

"What's the matter, lad? You're not going to leave me now, surely?"

"Let's stay here," answered Skratch in his own way. "We're getting too old to tramp about the country as we used to do. Here there is plenty to eat, and one can lie in the shade and sleep."

"You're getting lazy, boy," answered his master, moving slowly off, and the dog, after one more glance at his late comfortable home, followed unwillingly.

"Eh, boy! but I thought we'd been together too long to part now," said the old man when they were out of the town, and Skratch looked up with sad, tired eyes and gave a feeble wag of his tail.

All that day they tramped slowly along, but at night the old man was too tired to erect his tent, and so they slept in the open air. When starting time came in the morning, Skratch showed the same unwillingness to move, and it took much coaxing before they were off.

It was a short tramp that day, and they camped early in the shelter of some timber, and for the second night the tent was not pitched, and they slept in the open air. It was late in the morning when he awoke, and his head seemed very heavy. A fine rain was falling from low, sullen-looking clouds, and the fire seemed extra hard to light.

"Wake up, Skratch, boy!" he called to the dog, who was lying very still. But Skratch for the first time in his life made no answer to his master's call.

The old man went over to him and bent down slowly, for he was very weak this morning.

"Eh, Skratch, boy! but you've left me at last," he cried, and sat down heavily on the wet grass.

The dog was dead.

The rain continued to fall, quickly chilling him through his thin, worn clothes, but he never seemed to notice it.

"It's time I went, too," he muttered presently. "We should have stayed where we were, Skratch, boy; but it's too late now! I doubt but my time is about up, too."

With great difficulty he managed to get his tent up—he had no thought now of moving further on—and then sat shivering by the fire trying to warm himself. Once he fell asleep and woke up to find the rain had put the fire out. He was too tired to light it again, and so crept into the tent and lay down. The next day he made shift to bury Skratch, but it was his last effort, and then worn out he crawled back to the tent.

"It's been a long road we've travelled," he said to himself. "But I'm thinking we've come to the end of it at last."

Then he turned a calm face up towards the sky and waited.

They found him there three days later, his worn, old face quiet and peaceful; the poor, tired body at rest now; for the journeying was over, the *Wanderlust* satisfied, and the end of the road reached at last.

THE LITTLE FOREIGNER

HIS real name was Jean Le Roi, but it became a dead letter from the first day he arrived at the mill until the day when little Bill Davis, the carpenter, chiselled it out in letters a couple of inches long, as part of an inscription which began with a text and ended with a few words from an old nursery rhyme. But that, as Bill O'Grady used to say, is another kettle o' fish, and like starting off your leaders before you get your polers hitched up, and begins and ends nowhere. Bill O'Grady generally drove the bullock team which was used for drawing the felled timber from the forest to the mill, where it was sawn up ; hence he was known as "Bill the Bullocky," to distinguish him from little Bill Davis, the carpenter, and big Bill Allen, the overseer and boss of the men.

But to return to Jean Le Roi.

Probably it was because his name did not come easily to the men's tongues, rather than the fact that he was a Frenchman, which accounted for the fact that he became known as "the little foreigner." For there were other foreigners in the camp, notably Jack Turqueson, a huge Swede, who could roll a heavier log than even big Bill Allen, and always carried a long, bright sheath knife in his belt, though his easy good nature gave the lie to his ever using it, unless, as did happen occasionally, he

was the worse for liquor; but then, as every man knows, "when the wine is in the wits are out." Only in Jack Turqueson's case the wine was always whisky.

Anyway, from the night when Jean Le Roi first appeared in camp, bearing a note from the boss of the saw-mill saying he was to be taken on as an extra hand and put to any work he could best manage, he was by universal consent, and after one or two ineffectual attempts to pronounce his name, dubbed "the little foreigner," and remained so thereafter.

He was small, quick, and good-natured, anxious to be friendly with everyone, and made up for his shortcomings in the matter of strength and skill by an eagerness which would have been somewhat ludicrous if he had not been so entirely in earnest. The men took to him quickly once they got used to his rapid, broken English, and he fell into his place in the camp doing odd jobs here and there, helping everybody, and gradually acquiring skill in the handling of timber.

In fact, he shortly became somewhat of a favourite with the men, though big Bill Allen had resented his coming, and made the little man's life a hard one in many ways that were possible to him as overseer of the sawmill.

"What the hell does the boss want to send me such stuff as this for?" he had burst out on reading the letter Jean Le Roi had handed him on his arrival. "Look here, you—what the devil's your name? Frenchy. Can you fell timber?"

The little man, not altogether understanding the language, smiled, shook his head, and said rapidly:

"Non, non, m'sieur, not yet; but, look you, I can learn. I am vare queeck to learn."

"Learn!" growled the overseer. "What the blazes is the good of that to me? I ain't here to teach you."

The Frenchman bowed and waited.

"Can you use a broom and shovel?"

The little man nodded and smiled, showing all his teeth in pleasure at being able to answer in the affirmative.

"Yes, yes. I can use ze broom and shovel."

"Glad to hear there's something you can do," growled the other, in a tone that belied his words. "Take that shovel and broom and clear away the sawdust. You can use a barrow, too, I hope, to cart it round to the furnace. And," he shouted, as the little man was making rapidly off to commence his labours, "keep clear of that saw and belting. We don't want no foreign mincemeats round here."

Jean Le Roi smiled and again showed all his teeth. It was one of the secrets of his popularity that he could always laugh at another man's joke; and in this subtle form of flattery—for we all like our jokes to be appreciated—he was a past master.

And so he started work in the mill, sweeping up the sawdust and wheeling it round to the furnace, where it was used to keep the fire going. But before long one of the timber-fellers was disabled with a cut foot, and the overseer sent Jean Le Roi out to fill his place.

It was part of the overseer's business to choose and mark suitable trees for felling, leaving it to the axeman's discretion to cut the tree in such a way that it would fall in the most suitable position for putting the chains around it that it might be hauled by the bullock team to the mill. Once on the ground the tree, or at least that part of it destined for the mill, had to be stripped of its bark in order to lessen the weight and be more easily dragged over the ground.

Now all this was work requiring some skill and experi-

ence, and none knew better than the overseer that the little Frenchman possessed neither. But for some mysterious reason of his own which he confided to nobody he had taken a dislike to the newcomer, and seemed bent on giving him work—even at the expense of losing some good timber—the ill performance of which would give him an excuse for grumbling at the little foreigner, and perhaps for getting rid of him altogether.

And in the first part at least of this design he was not disappointed, for Jean Le Roi's first day's work with the axe provided plenty of material for grumbling.

Contrary to his usual custom the overseer went out with the bullock team when it started for the logs the Frenchman had felled and stripped the previous day. On arriving at the place where the first log lay he smiled grimly before opening the vials of his wrath on the unlucky little man, who, all unconscious of wherein he had offended, stood by well pleased with the result of his work.

"How the flaming hell do you think we are to get that out, you blanky messer?" roared the overseer, pointing to the log where it lay firmly wedged in amongst other timber, the surface of it all chipped, and with pieces of bark hanging to it. Le Roi had not been very successful in his first attempt at stripping. There was clear ground at the other side into which an experienced axeman would have directed the tree's fall, but the little man knew nothing of the science of tree felling, and his log was wedged in so tightly that to get it out seemed an impossibility without a greater expenditure of labour than the timber was worth.

But Bill the Bullocky, anxious to get the little man out of trouble, got a chain round it with much difficulty, and then the team of bullocks, incited by Bill's language and the crack of his long whip, strained forward in their en-

deavour to shift the log. Le Roi added his excited cries to those of the driver, while the overseer stood by and swore. One, two, three times they strained, and at the third attempt a chain snapped, and two of the bullocks were down. Then, indeed, the overseer's wrath broke out, and he showered down on the offender a string of oaths that, even if they were not all understood, were sufficient to convey the impression that he was not in favour with the boss. The second log was secured after much difficulty and the breaking of another chain, but next day Jean Le Roi was put on to other work, and the overseer wrote to the boss for permission to give him the "sack."

But the permission did not come, and so the little foreigner remained on at the mill the best of friends with everybody except the overseer.

The men all lived together in one building, which was divided off into three rooms. The first and largest was the living room. A long table, with forms on each side, ran down the centre of it. At this the men had their meals, and rough benches against the side walls served for sitting or lying on. The other two rooms were smaller, and had bunks fixed to the walls for sleeping purposes.

And in this building the little foreigner soon became a great favourite, for the overseer had a hut of his own, where he lived with his wife and child, the latter a little girl of about five years old, and never entered the men's quarters except on business.

Now it happened that one Saturday evening about a month after the little foreigner's advent, Bill Davis, the carpenter, had been to the nearest township, and brought back with him a couple of bottles of whisky. "It's my birthday," he announced, when after tea he produced them, and some comment had been made on this unwonted extravagance.

"Good enough for ye, me boy!" shouted Bill the Bullocky; "and it's your health we'll be drinkin', and wishin' ye had a birthday every Saturday night."

So the whisky was passed round, and the talk became louder and the laughter more frequent, until suddenly Jean Le Roi was seen to be mounted on the table somewhat unsteady on his legs, but with a fierce glitter of determination in his eyes.

"Look you, my frens," he cried, in his shrill, somewhat nasal tones. "I will sing you one song in honour of the birthday of my fren—my what you call him—my good mate Bill."

A storm of applause greeted this announcement and Le Roi paused in his speech.

"It is one song of libertee," he continued, as soon as he could make himself heard; "and we sing it in my beloved country, la belle France. Ah, my frens, I long for my beloved country here in this far away, what you call him—God dam hole of a place."

A roar of good-humoured laughter greeted this last announcement, for it was a phrase often on the lips of those present. Only Jack Turqueson, the huge Swede, did not laugh, but looked at the little man mounted on the table with an eye of sympathy, for he knew what it was to be alone in a far-off land pining for the country of his birth.

"But ze song, my frens," Le Roi went on. "It is called La Marseillaise, and now I will sing it to you."

And there, by the light of a couple of kerosene lamps in the rude slab hut, far away from his home and country, Jean Le Roi sang his song of liberty, while the men sat quiet and smoked, wondering what it was all about.

Allons enfans de la patrie,
Le jour de gloire est arrivé,
Contre nous de la tyrannie,
L'étendard sanglant est levé.

But if they did not understand the words they were soon captivated by the tune, and before the song was finished they were roaring it out in a chorus that made the lamps flicker, to any words that pleased them, and in a good many cases to no words at all.

Thereafter the little foreigner was a greater favourite than ever, and often in the hut at night would pipe out queer little French chansons of which his hearers understood not a word, but which had a strange charm for them nevertheless, though they would have been hard put to explain wherein that charm lay. And in return for this entertainment the men united to protect him from the overseer's bullying; though this could not be done in an open way, but only be achieved at the expenditure of some effort on their part by rectifying the mistakes he made before the overseer should discover them.

But Jean Le Roi had another listener, perhaps more appreciative of his singing than all the rest. This was the overseer's little daughter. The child loved to escape from her mother's care and go to where the little man was working; and Jean was never too busy to croon over his little songs to her as he worked, while the little one listened in a very rapture of delight. She loved to hear him speak his native tongue, and in time learned little words and phrases from him, which she exhibited before her parents with childish delight.

The father never liked to see them together, but forbore to interfere, probably because he was unused and almost afraid to cross the child in anything. And so a warm friendship grew up between this strangely assorted pair, which did not, however, succeed in modifying the overseer's behaviour towards the little man.

Once when the child was ailing for several days, and unable to go outside, nothing would satisfy her but that

Jean, as she always called him, should be sent for to sing to her, and, much against his will, Bill Allen told his wife to grant the child's wish.

Jean came, and sitting by the fire in the hut, with the little one in his arms, sang his songs over and over again, in answer to her repeated requests. She had one especial favourite which she was never tired of hearing, and the little man sang it so often, always to the same queer little tune, that Bill Allen one day found himself whistling it, and pulled up in the middle with an oath.

"Sing the one about the man crying for the door to be opened," she would say; and then Jean, who was never too tired to oblige her, would sing—

Au clair de la lune,
Mon ami Pierrot,
Prête toi ta plume
Pour écrire un mot.
Ma chandelle est morte,
Je n'ai plus de feu;
Ouvre-moi ta porte
Pour l'amour de Dieu.

Every man in the camp was fond of the child. Big, burly fellows they were, most of them, with rough, but kindly, hearts; and in their spare moments had little to amuse them, the township being too far off for frequent visiting. But the child would have little to do with them, and, with the exception of little Bill Davis, the carpenter, who made her rough toys out of odds and ends of wood, held herself severely aloof.

Thus her preference for Jean, the newcomer, was all the more marked; but it aroused no jealousy against him among the men, and certainly gained him no favour with the overseer. His light, volatile temperament seemed to amuse their slow and somewhat heavy natures, and it was a dull day indeed when Jean Le Roi could not raise a laugh by his jokes.

As time went on his English improved, though it was a somewhat strange mixture, and in moments of excitement he always lapsed back into his mother tongue.

And so a long and wet winter passed by, and spring began to put in an appearance, welcomed gladly by all, but by none more so than the little daughter of the overseer, who had been ailing on and off the whole time, and unable to leave the hut. Now, however, in the warm, bright days she was able to wander about the mill and watch Jean at work. She liked best to sit and watch the great circular saw spinning round with a burr that rose into a shriek as it met the big logs, and tore its way through them, making the yellow sawdust fly. But this was a joy not often permitted her unless her mother was there to guard against accidents, for circular saws and belting are dangerous things to wander amongst, and only the previous summer a lad, over-venturesome, had been caught and drawn in by the flying belts, whirled round and round, banged against the roof, and finally thrown out again an unrecognisable and horrible mass.

But this spring she was allowed another joy, which was to go out with the bullock team when the distance was not too great, and under her father's care to ride home again on the log that was being drawn back to the mill. She would call to the bullocks by name in her shrill, baby voice, and shriek with laughter at the jolts and jars. And as it was now part of Jean's work to accompany the team and help fix the chains, her enjoyment was unalloyed.

But as the overseer could not often find time to accompany her, this pleasure was none too frequent either, until by dint of much coaxing, and aided and abetted by her mother, who had a soft corner in her heart for the little foreigner, she was allowed to go under Jean's care.

Then, indeed, her delight knew no bounds. She would walk to the place from which the log was to be hauled, carried over the rough places in the little man's arms, and then wander about close to the men, seeking wild flowers and ferns, while they adjusted the chains and prepared to start homeward. Then, when all was ready, and a smooth place reached, Jean would place her on the log, walking close beside in case of accidents.

Many rides she had thus, until she began to receive into her kindly regards Bill the Bullocky; not for any special merit on his part, but because of the extraneous fact that he was the genius who guided the bullocks, thereby making those delightful rides possible.

But there came a day when something happened that made those pleasant outings for ever a thing of the past.

It was a beautiful morning, and the child had as usual accompanied the team, and then gone a little way off, but well in sight, to search for wild flowers while the men prepared the log for hauling. It was a big log, some 25 ft. long, and lying along the side of a steep hill. Below it, on the hillside, were bushes and undergrowth, but no timber of any size, and great care had to be exercised lest an incautious movement should start it on a headlong course downhill. It should have been shored up on the lower side by the man who felled it, but for some reason this had been omitted. Just at the critical moment, as Bill the Bullocky, who was on the upper side, was passing over a chain to Jean, who was on the lower, he slipped on the moist ground, and his weight coming in contact with the log from above, started it slowly over on its course downhill. Almost instinctively the bullock-driver uttered a cry of warning, and with one spring Jean was from underneath and in safety.

"*Sacre!*" began the Frenchman, in great excitement.

But he got no farther, for there came another cry from Bill.

“My God, Frenchy! The kid!”

The man's bronze face had turned a sickly colour, and whirling round towards the direction in which he was looking, Jean saw the child—the child in his charge—right in the path of the slowly descending log. All unconscious of her danger, she was gathering ferns, and a horrible death not 20 yards away.

The great piece of timber turned slowly over and over, crushing underneath its ponderous weight the light undergrowth and fern that lay in its path. No tree of sufficient size to arrest its course was there, and with every second it gathered speed and momentum, until in a few seconds more it would be rushing down the hillside with the speed and irresistibility of an express train.

The bullock-driver, with his hand raised and pointing towards the child, seemed unable to move, but Jean simultaneously with his first sight of her had sprung forward and downwards. He realised in a moment the hopelessness of trying to arrest that slowly moving mass. What would his strength or any man's serve once it was started on its downward course? His one hope was to reach the child before the log descended thus far, and to do this he devoted all his energies. Less than 20 yards separated the child from the piece of timber, which was crashing through the light undergrowth. With a bound Jean sprang downwards past it. He could travel faster than it now, though in a few moments more it would hopelessly outdistance him. Once in front of it, he darted straight towards the child, and snatching her up before she was even aware of her danger, started to run across the face of the now fast descending log. But the little one had been standing in the very middle of its

course, and the mass was now close to him, seeming to stretch out for an interminable distance on each side. In a moment his mind was made up. With something between a gasp and a sob, the little man braced himself firmly on his feet, lifting the child high in his arms, and then, just one brief instant before the log struck him, hurled her over it into safety and the path of crushed brushwood that lay behind.

Bill the Bullocky was bending over the horribly crushed form, and the child, crying bitterly from fright and the sight of her friend, stood by, scratched and bruised from the fall, but otherwise unharmed.

The little man's eyes opened, and he tried to speak. The bullock-driver bent down.

"Ze leetle one? Is she safe, my good mate, Bill?"

Bill lifted her forward; he could not speak.

"Ah, my little fren," he gasped. "I will sing to you no more. Poor Jean is done for. But it was good to save—you—was good."

The child cried, but she could not understand.

"Maman!" he gasped again, while the bullock-driver looked on uncomprehending.

And then, very low and in gasps, came the words of the old song he had so often sung to the little one—

Ma chandelle est morte,
Je n'ai plus de feu.
Ouvre-moi ta porte
Pour—l'amour—de—Dieu.

And then! Then the door opened, and Jean Le Roi passed through to what is beyond.

A NEAR THING

“**M**UST you really go into the township this evening, Jack?” she asked.

They were seated at the tea table, and there was an appealing look in her pretty, almost childish face as she put the question which Jack Spooner did not care to meet, and so he bent over his plate, as he answered—“I shouldn’t go if it wasn’t necessary, Mag.”

“But you go so often, Jack.”

He made no answer to this, and after looking over at him a couple of times, glances which he pretended not to see, she went on—

“If you must go, can’t you take me with you?”

He had been expecting she would suggest this, and yet he had no reply ready.

“I can’t, my dear,” he said, weakly.

“But why not, Jack?”

“Oh! There are plenty of reasons. I have some men to see, and I shall be late, and—and other things,” and he shuffled his feet on the floor, for the conversation was annoying him.

“You don’t want me, that is the real reason,” she said, the tears springing to her eyes.

Jack Spooner muttered something into his beard, and gulped the remainder of his tea in haste.

“Have it that way if you like, my dear,” he answered, rising from the table and leaving the room. “Always

best to leave a woman to herself when she starts crying. They get over it sooner," he said to himself as he proceeded to saddle his horse.

"Good-bye, Mag!" he called as, the horse being saddled, he rode through the gate which communicated with the track leading to the road. But, contrary to his expectations, he received no answer. "Got the sulks, I suppose," he muttered, and, striking his horse sharply with his heels, he rode off for the township at a smart pace.

But he was wrong, as he would have found out could he but have seen into the room he had left a few minutes before. With her face hidden in her hands, Maggie Spooner was crying bitterly, and had not heard the "Good-bye" her husband had called out when passing through the gate. "He doesn't want me," she sobbed to herself. "He is tired of me already, and only twelve months since we were married." Then another thought came to her, and she paused in her crying to consider it.

She had married Jack Spooner in spite of her parents' advice to the contrary, and they in their desire to prevent the match had not scrupled to tell her tales of the wild life he was commonly reported to have led. But all their stories of gambling and drinking bouts had been insufficient to prevent the girl from marrying the man of her choice, and since the marriage his conduct had been so exemplary that the young wife had forgotten all about the tales. Now, however, the remembrance of them had returned to her, and for the first time she began to fear there might be some truth in them. Little incidents hitherto unnoticed came back with added force. His frequent visits to the township in the evening, from which he always returned either in the most boisterous spirits or in a state of abnormal gloom, began to wear a sus-

picious look. Why should he object to taking her with him unless he were going to do something he did not wish her to see? It all began to seem plain to the young wife, and she shed many tears as she cleared the table and washed up the tea things. It didn't matter how much she cried, for there was no one to see her. She looked after the house herself, and, except for occasional help at busy seasons, her husband worked the farm alone. Their nearest neighbours were a couple of miles away, and as there was no woman in the household Maggie Spooner had for the most part a lonely time of it. But until this evening she had never minded the loneliness, and lately she had been looking forward to the time—not very far distant—when she would always have someone with her, someone who would be dependent on her for everything, and whose coming she awaited with a mixture of fear and joy. But now she felt very miserable and lonely, and longed for somebody to confide in. If Jack had only stayed at home, and they had sat close together, as they used to do in the early days of their married life, she felt she could have confided in him and been comforted. But by this time he was several miles away, and so, the work being finished, she went to bed and tried to forget her troubles in sleep.

Meanwhile Jack Spooner was cantering towards the township, a frown on his face, as he thought of the little incident which had just taken place. There had been a good deal of truth in the stories told to Maggie about him before their marriage, but since that event had taken place he had made a strenuous effort to give up the cards and drink. For a time, the new interests surrounding his home had made it fairly easy. Lately, however, these had begun to pall on him, and the desire for the old way of life returned day by day with increasing strength.

He had always been popular amongst men and fond of their society, and several times lately had asked himself the question whether he had better not have remained single. He seemed certain of the answer this evening, and it was with a gloomy face that he rode up to the hotel which stood in the main street of the township, and hitching up his horse to one of the verandah posts, passed into the bar, where he was greeted with shouts of welcome.

"Come along, Jack," called one man to him. "You are the very man we wanted to see. We're just going to have a little flutter with the cards, and want you to make a fourth."

For a moment Spooner hesitated. On his wedding day he had made a resolution not to touch the cards again, and though he had been gradually falling back into his old custom of paying frequent visits to the hotel, so far he had confined himself to an occasional drink and to watching the others play. But this evening the desire for excitement was strong upon him. He wanted to banish from his mind the remembrance of his wife's tearful face, and almost without a struggle he yielded, and in a few minutes was seated at a table in a back room of the hotel, with a glass at his right hand and a small pile of counters at his left. The old gambling fever was in his blood, and though the stakes were not high, he played with all the intensity he was capable of, and in the excitement of the game quickly forgot all about the young wife waiting for him out on the lonely farm.

It was late when the party broke up, and then, seeing that he was a winner, Spooner felt bound to shout drinks all round in the bar ere they dispersed for the night.

Not until he was well upon his road homewards, and the cool night air had dispersed some of the haziness induced by the drink he had taken and the stuffy room

in which he had been sitting, did he think again of his wife. And when he did so the thought made him feel uneasy. He feared her tearful face and reproachful looks. A man must have some enjoyment, he told himself. He couldn't always be tied to a woman's apron string, no matter how much he loved her. But in spite of this reasoning he felt he had not acted rightly, and on approaching the house he went as quietly as possible, so that if his wife were asleep she might remain so, and not awake to reproach him with being so late.

As he dismounted at the gate one of the dogs ran up to him with a bark of welcome, but he kicked it savagely with his foot lest its noise should bring about what he was seeking to avoid. After stabling his horse he took off his boots on the verandah, and that night made his bed on a couch in the sitting-room.

He was up early in the morning and had the fire lighted long before his wife was astir; for if Jack Spooner were fond of play, not even his worst enemy could accuse him of being afraid of work. Then he busied himself about the place until he heard Maggie's voice calling him to breakfast. He entered the room, and kissing her in a rough but kindly way, sat down and commenced his meal, expecting questions and perhaps reproaches. But Maggie made no reference to his late return, nor to the fact that he had not slept in his bed. When she did speak, which was not often, it was on indifferent subjects, and much relieved at this, Jack ventured to observe her face across the table when she was not looking his way. With something of a pang at his heart he noticed that she was tired and worn looking, and her eyes showed traces of tears. It made him feel ashamed of himself, and he made a weak sort of resolution that he must bring himself up again and not leave her alone so much.

All that day his manner was more gentle than usual, and in the evening as they sat together on the verandah he put his arm round her. She thrilled responsively at this unusual display of affection, and encouraged by it laid her head on his shoulder and in a low voice told him of what was going to happen in the near future, and of her fears and hopes. The news came as a complete surprise to Jack Spooner, and long after his wife had left him and gone inside to bed he remained on the verandah trying to realise all that it meant.

"Poor little girl," he muttered to himself. "I'm afraid I've been a bit of a brute to her, but, by Jove, I must pull up sharp now and look after her until this is safely over. I hope it turns out to be a boy," he mused, giving a last glance up at the sky ere turning in for the night.

The knowledge that he was soon to be a father, and that Maggie needed all the kindness and love he could lavish on her, brought out all that was best in Jack Spooner, and did for him that which he would not have been able to do unaided in some such way; it helped him to keep his resolution to give up drinking and gambling.

All day long Maggie looked forward to the evening, for Jack never now said he must go into the township on business. Indeed, he seldom went there at all, and only when pressing business compelled him. He knew his weakness, and distrusting his power to resist temptation, avoided it. When compelled to go he hurried through with his business, and always made his wife the excuse for not joining his old associates in a game of cards. And this abstinence cost him not a little. Often he was tempted to have just one game or just one drink, but the thought of his wife at home and the little baby that was so soon to arrive helped him, and he conquered.

And then, in the early spring weather, when the wattles down by the creek were all in bloom and the young crops waving in the wind promised an abundant harvest to follow, the little baby arrived, and Jack Spooner's soul was overjoyed, for it was a fine, healthy boy. It was a memorable moment to him when he first saw the little stranger, and took him in his arms, and glanced from the child to his wife, who lay in bed happy and smiling.

"Isn't he a wonderful baby, Jack?" she said; and the man in his own less emotional way agreed with her.

So the time sped by, and in the early warm summer weather Maggie used to take the baby, and go and sit near where Jack was working. And the youngster grew and thrived, and the mother's heart was glad and contented in the possession of husband and son.

The father was happy, too, but the old fever began to stir in his blood, and at times he found the long evenings at home very trying, and began to search for excuses that would take him into the township, where he might see his old associates.

At last, one evening he announced his intention of going in, and somewhat to his surprise, Maggie raised no objection. So he rode away in the evening light, waving a farewell to his wife and child, and on arriving at the Cross Keys, his usual haunt, was greeted with surprise and delight by the men there, who had almost given up hope of him as a participator of their revels.

That night he indulged himself to the full at his old pastimes, and rode home late, with a heavy head and light pockets. Maggie was waiting for him when he returned, and greeted him with a reproachful look, but no words passed her lips. His losses had only inflamed his desire for more play, and the next evening he again

saddled his horse for a visit to the Cross Keys. This time she uttered a faint protest, but he bore her down with a gay laugh, and rode off. Luck was in that night, and he won back his losses and something else besides ; but the first signs of dawn were showing in the sky as he dismounted unsteadily at his own door, and threw himself on the couch in the sitting-room for a brief sleep. He salved his conscience a little by giving Maggie the money for a new dress and something special for the baby out of his winnings ; but this was no comfort to the young wife, who longed only for the close companionship of the early days of their marriage.

But the fever raged in Jack Spooner's blood with a strength he seemed incapable of resisting, and, indeed, now it had gone so far he seldom tried, but gave himself up to his desires. At times, in his quieter moments, the thought of his wife and child would for a time make him feel very uncomfortable, and he would determine to reform. But these moods never lasted for long, and generally terminated in an exceptionally unrestrained outburst, which made even his associates pause and wonder.

Things went on in this way for some months, and during all that time Maggie never openly reproached her husband for his neglect of her and their child. True, the sadness of her face was a silent protest against his conduct, but the man did not care to meet her gaze oftener than was absolutely necessary, for he felt ashamed. He visited the township now almost nightly, and very often on his return was so far gone in liquor as to be scarcely able to sit in the saddle.

And then one day the baby fell sick, and Spooner, with an anxious heart, hovered about the house all day, unable to settle down to his work, for in spite of all his faults the little one was very dear to him, and the sight

of his wife's anxious face as she hung over her baby cut him to the heart.

"How is he now, Mag?" he asked nearly every hour, and then went slowly back to his work on receiving her answer.

Slowly the day passed away, and then about 6 o'clock Maggie rushed out with a white, stricken face, and shrieked to him,

"Jack! Jack! Ride for the doctor, quick; baby is dying!"

The man went cold at her words. "Are you sure?" he began ———

"Oh! Yes, yes," she cried. "Don't wait to ask questions, but go, for God's sake, and bring the doctor back with you. If baby dies I shall die too."

"Don't say that, my girl," he commenced, but she had rushed back to the child.

With hands that trembled somewhat he saddled his horse, and in a few minutes more he was galloping down the road for the doctor, whose house lay on the other side of the township. Rain was falling heavily, and he had not waited to put on his coat; but he scarcely noticed it, though he was soon wet through. But at the end of his journey he received a check, for the doctor was out. No one seemed to know where or how soon he would return. Turning his horse, Spooner rode slowly back into the township, uncertain what to do. His excitement was fast evaporating, and the rain had chilled him to the bone. He must have a glass of whisky to warm him up and help him to decide, so at the Cross Keys he dismounted and went inside. His usual associates were there, but at first he did not join them, and drank his whisky standing up at the counter, wondering what he ought to do. The spirit warmed him, and he began to think perhaps Maggie had taken too

serious a view of things. Young mothers were always so absurdly anxious about their babies, and magnified the slightest ailment into a serious illness. Why even now the little chap might be all right again, and at any rate there was nothing he could do until the doctor returned; meanwhile he would have another drink, for he still felt cold and shivery after his wetting.

He never knew exactly how it happened, and in after years looked back on that evening as a terrible nightmare, which for a time had seemed like reality. It had been his intention to go back again to the doctor's house and wait for his return, but the next thing he remembered was being shaken roughly by the shoulder, and a voice shouting in his ear:

"Spooner! Spooner! Wake up, man."

He gazed stupidly around him, and slowly realised that he had fallen asleep in the bar of the Cross Keys, and that it was now 11 o'clock.

"What is it?" he growled.

But the next words startled him into instant activity.

"Man, I came by your place but just now, and there was your wife wandering up and down the road outside with the baby in her arms. She said it was dying, and that you had gone for the doctor hours ago, and had not returned. She seemed off her head, but I got her inside, and then rode on here for you. You'd better get home to her, man, as quick as your horse will take you, and I'll go round to the doctor's and send him along, though I fear it's too late."

With a bound the wretched man sprang to his feet and rushed to his horse, hitched up to the verandah post outside. In another moment he was galloping down the road in the direction of his home with a dreaded fear tugging at his heart. The night was dark, and the road not any too safe, but he never thought of that, or if he did

disregarded it. What would it matter if his horse fell and killed him! Better die thus than arrive at his home and find his baby dead, and his wife perhaps mad. "Wandering up and down the road outside," the man had said. Good God! What a state she must have been in, and during that time he had been lying at the Cross Keys in a drunken sleep. He cursed himself aloud as his horse dashed wildly down the road towards home. God! If he should only find them well how he would thank God and never touch a drop of the cursed drink again. But it was too much to hope for. The man had said he feared it was too late. Then what remained for him, Jack Spooner? And for the first time he realised to the full his love for wife and child.

With a wild clatter of hoofs he dashed up to his own gate, and pulled his horse back almost on to its haunches to avoid a buggy which suddenly appeared out of the blackness of the night.

"Who is that?" he called sharply.

"Dr. Adam," came a voice from the trap. "That you, Spooner? I've just been attending to your wife and child. It was a near thing for the little one, I can tell you. I called in here on my way back from Evan's place to borrow a candle for my lamp, and found your wife nearly mad with grief and the baby in a bad way. However, the worst is over now, and I'll come out early to-morrow to see the little one again. Sorry I was out when you called at my place. Good night!" And he drove away into the darkness, while Jack Spooner, sitting half dazed on his horse, was offering up a wordless thanksgiving to heaven for sparing his little one. With it he joined a resolution, often made before and broken, but this time to be kept, and then, dismounting, he entered the house with bowed head and a great thankfulness in his heart.

MY UNCLE SMITH

“GOOD-BYE!” said my uncle, putting his head out of the railway carriage window as the train began to move off. “I shall write as soon as I have settled down, and then I shall expect to hear from you often.”

There was just time to grip his hand, and promise to be a good correspondent before he was borne off, and I was left on the platform alone.

He was an eccentric old man, this uncle of mine. A bachelor and possessed of ample means, he had suddenly made up his mind to change his place of abode from Melbourne to Sydney. It being impossible for me—his only relative—to accompany him, owing to my business detaining me in Melbourne, he was going to live in lodgings.

I had expectations from him. Indeed, they were more than expectations, for he had definitely promised to leave me all his money if I were a dutiful nephew, and this I naturally strove to be. Now, you must not think that on this account I was anxious for the old fellow to die, for I was genuinely fond of him. Still, it was a comfort to think that when in the natural course of events I was compelled to mourn his loss, my grief would be softened by the possession of £20,000 in hard cash.

So it was with a genuine sense of loss that I made my way back to my lodging, and spent the evening alone in mournful ruminations.

In a little over a week I received a long letter from my uncle, announcing his safe arrival in Sydney, his discovery of suitable lodgings, and sundry other bits of news, and concluding with the command to answer his letter at once, and to write often thereafter.

I had just finished reading it, and was studying the address at the beginning, which seemed somewhat complicated, when my friend Brown rushed in in his usual impetuous way, crying:

"I say, old fellow, come along with me. I'm taking Dora and her mother to the theatre, and I want you to take the old girl off my hands."

Dora, I may say, is the young lady Brown hopes to marry some day, when his salary is raised; at present it is only £2 a week, and the young woman's tastes are somewhat expensive.

"Really!" I began in a doubtful way. "There are some letters I should write this evening. Can't you do without me?"

"Out of the question!" he answered, decidedly, helping himself to one of my cigars. "Hurry up and change your coat. I promised to meet them at seven, and it is a quarter to now."

There was nothing for it but to obey. My uncle's letter must wait for twenty-four hours, so I changed my coat, and we set out.

We spent a pleasant evening, and I retired to bed pleased that I had been unselfish and obliged Brown.

The following evening I sat down and wrote a long letter to my uncle. I told him how lonely I was without his society, and how I hoped he would be comfortable in

his new home. In conclusion, I made some touching remarks, saying that though divided by space our spirits could still commune together through the medium of His Majesty's post-office. It was a beautiful letter, and would, I was sure, affect the old man deeply.

I sealed it up, and proceeded to address the envelope—

“W. Smith, Esq.,”

That was all I could remember, and where the deuce had I put my uncle's letter? I searched in all my pockets, on the mantelshelf, on the table, in the coal scuttle; in fact, everywhere, but no letter could I find. I opened the door, and shouted along the passage to my landlady—

“Have you seen a letter of mine kicking about?”

She appeared from the back regions wiping both hands on her apron. “Was you asking about that blue and white blazer of yours, sir? I took it away last night to sew a button on, and it was that dirty I sent it along to the wash.”

“Oh! Confound the blazer!” I replied, irritably. “Did you see a letter of mine lying about?”

“No, indeed, sir; but Styles' man was 'ere this afternoon, and 'e said if you didn't pay some ——!” But I had retired into my room, and closed the door with a bang.

Again I searched everywhere, but with no success. It was most annoying. I must wait now to send my letter until my uncle wrote again, and meanwhile he would think me neglectful. Of course, it would be all right when my explanation reached him, but meanwhile it was most annoying.

In about ten days the expected letter came. I read it carefully, and noticed the old man seemed much dis-

appointed that he had not heard from me. Well, he should hear now, and I turned to the head of the letter for the address. Horror! It bore nothing but the one word, "Sydney." Surely the fates were conspiring against me! How was it possible to address a man, W. Smith, Esq., Sydney, and expect the letter to be delivered? And yet that was all I knew. I searched the postmarks carefully, but learned nothing more from them, and in despair decided to consult Brown, as he had been the cause of my losing the first letter.

"Advertise in the 'agony column,'" he said, and really it did not seem a bad idea. There was only one objection to it. My uncle never read the papers. However, I tried it, and for the next week was overwhelmed with replies from old men bearing the name of Smith who were anxious to furnish a "distracted nephew" with their addresses. But the right one did not reply, and I was at my wits' end to know what to do.

Brown's next suggestion struck me as a brilliant idea. I was to post a letter addressed to W. Smith, Esq., Sydney, every day, and keep on doing so until one of them fell into the hands of my uncle, as it was sure to do, if I only persevered long enough.

I did it for a fortnight, and at the end of that time was waited upon by a post-office official, who produced a bundle of these letters, and demanded to know the meaning of it.

I said I wanted them delivered, and he said—

"Why don't you give a proper address?"

"That's all I know," I answered, helplessly.

"Look here, young man," he said sternly; "our department is not a philanthropic one, and if you mean this as a joke, you had better give it up. We don't like 'em."

I assured him it was anything but a joke, and he left, warning me not to do it again or they would take steps, whatever that may mean. After this I lost faith in Brown, and began to despair.

Meanwhile I had received two more letters from my uncle, each bearing only the hated address, "Sydney," and in which he bitterly upbraided me for so soon forgetting him, and reminding me of his testamentary intentions.

"Why on earth couldn't the old fool put his address on his letters?" I exclaimed angrily, for by this time the matter was getting on my nerves.

After long and anxious thought I decided there was nothing for it but to go over to Sydney and try to hunt him up. Next day I asked my employer for leave of absence.

"Do you wish to sever your connection with us, Mr. Smith?" he asked, bluntly. I endeavoured to explain I wished to go to Sydney to ascertain the address of an uncle to whom I was much attached.

"Go to Sydney to get an address!" he exclaimed. "Nonsense! Write!"

Again I tried to explain the peculiar circumstances of the case, but my confusion was so great that he cut me short with—

"Quite impossible, Mr. Smith. I should think Yarra Bend was the address you were in want of," and walked away.

I went home in despair, to find another letter from my uncle awaiting me, in which he said, after upbraiding me for my want of affection, that he was contemplating forming new ties, and that if he did so his will would, of course, be altered, but that even now, if I wrote to him, all would be forgiven.

I tore my hair and raged up and down the room in im-

potent despair until my landlady came up and said the sick gentleman in the next house begged I would not make such a noise. Then I sat down to think.

The gods themselves seemed against me. There was £20,000 slipping through my fingers, and all for want of an address. The one word, "Sydney," standing at the head of all my uncle's letters stared me in the face, but not one word of the address on the first letter could I remember. What had I done with it? Why had that fool Brown come in and taken me away just as I was going to answer it? Why didn't my uncle put his address on his letters? And why, oh, why didn't he bear any name but Smith? All would have been easy then.

The next morning I pulled out three grey hairs, and I am only twenty-seven.

On my way to the city I thought I would try a telegram, so went into the office and wrote one out. I gave it to the clerk, and after glancing at it he handed it back. "Can't send it for you in cypher," he said.

"But it's not in cypher," I cried.

"The address is," he answered, and turned away.

Then I lost hope. Brown used to make suggestions about private detectives and other things, but I had lost faith in Brown. My only hope was that the old man might take it into his head to come to Melbourne to see me, and then I could explain all. As each letter of his arrived, I used to open it in feverish haste, hoping he would have put the full address. But only to be disappointed. There was never anything but "Sydney" and the date. He wrote often, and his references to forming new ties grew more numerous and explanatory. I gathered that if he did not hear from me soon he would lay his heart, hand, and fortune at the feet of his landlady. Ah, if he had only mentioned her name! I bought a Sydney directory, but it was no use. I even

squandered half-a-crown in consulting a fortune teller, but learned nothing. My grey hairs increased day by day, and my employer began to look at me out of the corner of his eye.

At last the blow fell. It came in the form of a newspaper heavily marked with blue pencil. I opened it, and read—

“Yesterday at St. John’s ——— were united in matrimony our esteemed fellow-townswoman, Mrs. Maria Martin, and Mr. W. Smith, late of Melbourne. The lady was attended to the altar by her six charming daughters, while her eldest son acted as best man to the bridegroom.”

It was over, and I stared at the paper in despair. A knock came at the door, and my landlady appeared.

“Oh, sir! here is that blazer I sent to the wash. I ’ope you ’aven’t been wanting it, for they kept it a long time; and this letter, sir, it was in the pocket, and I’ve ’ad it downstairs a week or more, but I knew it was of no importance.”

It was my uncle’s letter left in the coat I had been wearing when Brown—that fool Brown—came and forced me to go to the theatre. I gazed at it stupidly. There was the full address at the top of the letter, and now that I saw it I remembered it every word.

My landlady again. “A letter, sir.”

It was from my uncle, and ran as follows:—

The paper will have informed you of my marriage. I have made a new will, and enclose your legacy now.—Yours, &c.,
W. SMITH.

I took up the envelope. Out fell a shilling.

Another knock. Heavens! was I never to be left alone! Brown burst in, all excitement!

“I say, old chap,” he cried, “I’ve got a splendid plan for finding that uncle of yours.”

THE FATAL BOOK

THERE were three of us, Wynstay, Wilson, and myself; two of us bachelors living in rooms in the city, with separate landladies to watch over us; for though good friends, we had always mutually agreed not to put our friendship to the supreme test of living together. The third, Wynstay, was a married man residing in the suburbs. But we often visited one another, and it was during a reunion of the triangle, as we called it, that the strange series of events I am about to relate commenced.

Wilson was engaged to be married to a very charming girl, and I was—well, anxious to become engaged to the dearest, no, the cheapest—no, I mean she was the dearest girl to me and yet the cheapest if I could only get her. I hope you understand what I do mean, for I am afraid I haven't expressed it very well. But on the night that Wynstay and I paid Wilson a call I had not yet mustered up courage to propose.

We had been talking of many things, and finally reached the occult, when Wilson from the depths of his armchair spoke up, and said—

“That reminds me of a rather curious thing that came under my own observation some time ago.”

“Pass the decanter,” said Wynstay, “and then tell us what it was.”

"It concerned a book," Wilson went on, addressing himself to me, and paying no heed to Wynstay's request.

"A cheque book, I suppose," said Wynstay, reaching for the decanter, and helping himself. "That is the most interesting sort of book I know of."

"It was nothing of the sort," answered Wilson. "If you will only shut up I will tell you about it."

"Forge ahead, old man, only your syphon has run dry."

"There's a tap outside," was the reply, and then he began the story:—

"There was a man—I forget his name, or where he lived, but that doesn't matter now—possessed a curious old book, an early edition of Rabelais' works. He had bought it for a few pence at one of those old book stalls so common in London, and for years it lay unused on his bookshelf. Then one day he lent it to a friend, and here begins the mystery. Before the friend returned it the man was dead."

"How long did he keep it, though?" asked Wynstay. "I know some chaps who, when they borrow a book, keep it."

"That doesn't matter at all," Wilson resumed, hastily. "If you persist in interrupting I won't tell the story, and we are coming to the exciting part. Now, as the owner was dead, the borrower couldn't very well return the book, so he kept it on his shelves until in time a friend borrowed it from him. Three weeks after he, too, was dead," and Wilson looked at us impressively.

"Who was dead?" I asked.

"The man who lent the book, of course. Don't you see, as long as a man kept the book he was all right, but if he lent it something horrible was sure to happen to him shortly afterwards."

"I don't believe it," said Wynstay. "Where did you hear all this rot?"

"I had it from the poor wretch who in a moment of weakness lent the volume to me."

"By Jove! You don't mean to say that you've got it —" I began, when Wynstay again interrupted.

"And what happened to the man who lent it to you? Did he die, too?"

"No, poor chap, his fate was worse. The day after he lent me the book his father-in-law died and the whole family came to stay with him, and are there still. I haven't dared to go near the house since, and that was two years ago."

"And you have the book still?" I asked.

Wilson nodded.

"I wouldn't dare to part with it," he said. "I'm sure something horrible would happen to me if I did."

"Let me see it, old man, will you?"

Somewhat unwillingly Wilson rose from his chair, and unlocking a drawer in his writing table took out a book, which he handed to me, and then stood close by in case I should attempt to make away with it. As he had said, it was an old unexpurgated edition of Rabelais, full of quaint wood-cuts, and at once I became possessed of a consuming desire to read and examine it at my leisure.

"I wish you'd lend it to me, old man," I said.

Wilson turned white in a moment.

"I couldn't, really I couldn't," he stammered. "I wonder how you can ask after what I have just told you."

"Oh, but that was all nonsense," I answered, laughing. "I'll take great care of it, and let you have it back in a few days."

"I'd rather not," he answered, nervously, putting out his hand for the book, which I was about to return to him when Wynstay came to the rescue. He told Wilson he was a fool and several other things, that he should

not think of the risk he ran if only he could oblige a friend. Then I joined in my entreaties, and finally, after much persuasion, it was arranged I was to have the book provided I returned it in three days.

We broke up shortly after this, and when I got back to my rooms I put into execution a plan I had been contemplating for some time. This was no less than writing to Julia, the girl I spoke of earlier, and asking her to be my wife. So I sat down and wrote, and re-wrote, an impassioned letter, in which I poured out all my affection for her. It was a beautiful letter, and I felt when it was finished that if she could resist it she must have a heart of stone. Then I sat down to read Rabelais.

For the next couple of days I saw nothing of Wilson, but on the evening of the third day, as I was seated in my room reading the Rabelais, which was to be returned in a few hours, he burst in upon me with disordered dress, and a light of terror in his eye. Flinging himself into a chair he put his face in his hands and groaned aloud.

Now, I am a careful man, so seizing the first piece of paper that came to hand, I put it in the book to mark where I had left off, and laying it down I turned to Wilson and asked what was the matter.

For some time I could get nothing from him but groans, but at last he recovered sufficiently to speak coherently.

"I knew when you borrowed that book the other night that something was sure to happen," he said, "and now the blow has fallen, and I am a ruined and disgraced man."

"Well, you're not dead, at any rate," I said, heartily, trying to cheer him up.

"It would be better for me if I were. That fatal book has undone me," he answered with a groan.

"Tell me about it," I asked, beginning to feel nervous, and glancing with some apprehension at the volume lying on my table. And then Wilson told me.

Ever since he parted with the book, he said, he had felt an unaccountable depression which he could not throw off, try how he would. At last it became so bad that to cheer himself up he went to pay an evening call on a very charming young widow in East Perth, whom we all knew. She lived with her father, a crusty old wretch, whom we always made sure was out before we ventured to call on his daughter, whose husband had been drowned at sea about a year before. Well, unfortunately, Wilson had this particular evening found her alone, and as she was always sympathetic, he had a very pleasant time up to a certain point. This ended, however, when the old man suddenly burst in on them, and found Wilson's arm around his daughter's waist and their heads very close together.

"You fool!" I could not help exclaiming, when he reached this part of his narrative. "What did you do that for when you are engaged to another girl?"

"I don't know," he answered with a groan. "I simply didn't know it was there until the old man discovered it, and then the way he played up was awful until Julia—that's her name, you know—said we were engaged, and I hadn't the courage to deny it."

"A nice mess you've made of things," I said, scornfully.

"It was all because I lent you that book," he answered. "It was fate, and I couldn't help myself."

"The book be hanged! It was your own confounded foolishness, playing up with a young girl's affections when you are engaged to another girl all the time."

"She isn't a young girl," he protested. "She's a widow, a designing widow."

"All the worse for you," I answered. "What do you propose to do?"

"That's just what is driving me to distraction. For goodness sake, old man, help me. If Lily should hear of this I don't know what would happen."

"I do. She would break it off with you."

"I know."

"But you could still have the widow," comfortingly.

"Look here, old man," he said, solemnly. "That widow is all right as a friend, but sooner than marry her I would commit suicide. Will you help me?"

"You don't deserve it," I said, "but I will do my best for you all the same. Let me think for a bit."

He watched me in a hopeless kind of way, until I put a question to him.

"Look here," I said. "Do you really think this confounded book has anything to do with your trouble?"

"I'm sure of it," he answered, fervently.

"Well then the best way out of it will be to lend the widow the book, and then get Wynstay to borrow it from her, so that something will happen to her also."

"But how will that help me?" he asked.

"Oh, she may die, or a thousand other things may happen. At any rate we will try. I'll go round there to-morrow and lend her the book, and then we can get Wynstay to do his share."

For a moment Wilson cheered up a bit, and then suddenly relapsed again.

"But if you lend the book something dreadful will happen to you," he said.

"Oh, I'll risk that," I answered, laughingly. "You don't catch me getting engaged to a girl in such a silly way as you did."

Poor chap! He was in very low spirits, and when I

saw him home he begged me to go in and stay with him for a bit, so that next afternoon when I called on the widow I had not finished reading the fatal book. She was out, so I left it for her with my compliments, and came away well pleased with myself, hoping I had done Wilson a good turn.

But my good spirits were not to last for long, not twenty-four hours, in fact, for whilst I was sitting at lunch the next day there came a loud and peremptory knock at the front door. I heard my landlady open it, and then a man's voice angrily demanding to see me. The next moment the door of my room was thrown violently open, and the widow's father, followed by Wilson, entered the room.

"So, sir," began the father, melodramatically, "we find you in. It is well. I have called upon you for an explanation of your most extraordinary conduct."

He paused, but I was too dumbfounded to reply, and glanced helplessly at Wilson to see if he could throw any light on the matter. Even then, worried as I was, I could not help noticing that he looked in much better spirits than when I had seen him last. But the old man was speaking, or rather roaring, again.

"To lend my daughter, sir—an innocent and confident girl—literature of the class you forced, yes, sir, forced upon her notice is nothing less than an outrage, yes, sir, an outrage."

He paused again, not so much for oratorical effect as to regain his wind, and in a burst the truth, or as it turned out presently, only a part of the truth, became plain to me. To lend a girl, even if she were a widow, an unexpurgated edition of Rabelais was, to say the least of it, indiscreet. But I had been so anxious to help Wilson that the fatal book had only been a means to-

wards an end, and I had never so much as given a thought to what it contained. Now I realised the awful thing I had done; but there was worse to come.

"Were it not, sir, that you are going to marry my daughter I should consider it necessary to horsewhip you for the insult," he roared, and I listened to the words as if in a dream.

"Marry your daughter!" I stammered helplessly. "I assure you nothing is further from my thoughts, besides," I added, maliciously, "I understand that the lady in question is engaged to my friend Wilson here."

"Was, sir, was!" roared the old man. "But he has explained to me that it was all a mistake, and that he is engaged to another lady. After your proposal of yesterday, which my dear child has authorised me to accept on her behalf, I shall expect the matter to be brought to a speedy conclusion, and on that ground only will I consent to forget your insult to my confiding daughter."

My proposal of yesterday! This was piling Ossa upon Pelion with a vengeance, and I groped blindly for light.

"My proposal of yesterday!" I began, but he interrupted me with another roar that shook the room.

"Yes, sir, your proposal, your written proposal. You will not attempt to deny that, I hope," and he looked round at Wilson, who all this while had been silent, as if for approval.

"I should like to see it," I stammered, trying to appear cool.

"You shall, sir, you shall," he answered, and producing a letter, shook it under my nose, saying, "Deny it, sir, if you can." I glanced at the letter. Angels and ministers of grace! It was the draft of the proposal I had written to Julia, the girl I desired to marry. But how had it reached this man's daughter? Ah, I had it now!

When Wilson had burst in on me I had taken a piece of paper from the table to mark the place in the Rabelais where I had left off, and not having taken up the book again until I was going to call upon the widow the paper had gone with it, and then, through an unfortunate similarity of names, the wrong lady had thought it meant for her. Hence this awful trouble. Truly, parting with this book was proving a fatal thing for me.

I was too utterly overcome to make any rejoinder, and after a few remarks, which sounded suspiciously like threats, the old man left, promising to see me the following evening to arrange further preliminaries.

Wilson remained, but he was in such palpably good spirits over his own escape that I wished he would go; in fact, I told him so.

"All right, old chap," he answered, consolingly. "You will be feeling better to-morrow, when you've got used to your good fortune. The widow's not at all a bad sort."

"Get out!" I growled. "I'm a desperate man. If you stay here I might kill you."

"Going," he answered. But with the handle of the door in his hand, he turned. "If you should want to get out of it," he said, "all you have to do is to get Wynstay to borrow the book, and then something is sure to happen to her. You said so yourself, you know," and he was gone.

I was like the proverbial drowning man clutching at a straw. Something must be done, and I would try the first. Seizing my hat I rushed round to Wynstay's house and besought him if he wished to save an old friend from a miserable death to at once borrow the confounded book that had caused all the trouble.

"Cheer up, old chap," he said. "I'll get it for you like

a shot," but I could see from his manner that he didn't think it would do me any good.

"If you don't mind," I said, weakly, "I'll stay here till you came back, just to make sure, you know."

"Right you are," he answered. "The wife is upstairs," in fact, she's not very well," and he blushed, "so you won't be disturbed here," and he showed me into a sitting-room, and departed.

In awful suspense I waited for his return. What if she should refuse to give up the book, or, worse still, have destroyed it? All then would be lost, and there would be nothing for it but marriage with the widow, or—I shuddered at the alternative; it was too horrible.

Nearly an hour passed, and then just as I was contemplating going in person and forcibly wresting the book from its present possessor—though this might have destroyed the charm—Wynstay burst into the room, waving the fatal volume in the air.

"Is that it?" I gasped, almost too excited to speak.

He nodded, and the relief was so great I could only just manage to gasp out, "Give it here," and then sank into an armchair, while Wynstay rushed for a brandy and soda.

"I'm not sure that I ought to give it to you," he said, smiling, referring to the book, not the brandy and soda, when I had somewhat revived. "But I'm not superstitious, so I'll be generous and let you have it. But it's an awful risk for me."

I was too overcome to be generous, and when I returned to my lodging took the book with me.

How I managed to get through that night and the next day I can never remember; it was all like a hideous dream. What if now the mysterious charm should cease to work, and the widow suffer nothing through parting

with the book? Oh, horror, what if her punishment should be marriage with myself? As the hour approached when the old man had announced his intention of presenting himself to arrange what with horrible satire he was pleased to term the preliminaries, my state got critical.

Nine o'clock, and a knock at the door, but instead of what I feared, Wilson burst in with a beaming face, shouting—"It's all right, old man! Cheer up! We're both well out of it."

"How?" I gasped, faintly. It seemed too good to be true.

"In the most extraordinary way," he answered. "That husband of hers that we all thought was drowned at sea isn't dead at all. He was saved, and turned up this afternoon. He's going to take her to America."

When I came to myself Wilson was pouring out whisky to revive me, and in his agitation drinking it himself.

I was still gasping with relief when Wynstay entered. He sat down with a low groan, and gazed at us miserably.

"What's the matter, old man?" we asked, but at first we could not make out what he said. At last we grasped it, and it was—

"That confounded book! I should never have parted with it."

"Has anything happened?" asked Wilson.

"My wife!" he said, and paused.

"Not dead," I cried, knowing she was ill.

"No!" he groaned. "Twins."

HIS OWN DOING

THE township of Moonabri lay baking in the sun. Not that there was anything remarkable about that to anyone at all acquainted with the climatic conditions of the place, for it was generally hot at Moonabri. Hot and dry, and when the wind blew, dusty; so dusty that midday would take on the gloom of evening, and those not used to the place roused themselves from the apathy the heat had induced, and said to one another, "Now, it is going to rain, and we shall have it cool for a bit; perhaps even be able to have a bath." But the older inhabitants were wiser. Long experience had taught them that it never rained at Moonabri. Sometimes a mixture of warm water and dust fell for a little while, but real rain was unknown except by hearsay. To the children who had never been out of the township, a lake was an unsolvable mystery. They had never seen more than a bucket of water at any one time, and formed their opinions of the rest of the world on Moonabri.

"Why do I drink beer?" one of its citizens was reported to have said in answer to a visiting clergyman's reprimand for being drunk. "Why, you see, Mister, in this here blanky place the water's so darned scarce we can't spare it for drinking." And indeed, but for the station tanks, it would really have seemed not unlikely that there was more beer than water in the place.

Hence Moonabri had many excuses for not being exactly a temperance township; it consisted of little more than one broad street, down the centre of which ran a long row of thirsty-looking trees—the local beverage not being much use to them, and on either side the buildings, none of them more than one story high, and all roofed with corrugated iron, which shone steely blue in the sun's rays. Some of them had broad verandahs in front, stretching across what was called by courtesy the footpath, and under these verandahs the inhabitants spent most of their spare time in a scanty undress, the male part smoking, and all trying to keep off the swarms of flies, which were another of the local attractions.

The two broadest and most comfortable of these resting places were those outside the hotel and the general store, and the former of these was naturally the most favoured, the national "tired feeling" being very much in evidence at Moonabri.

It being Saturday afternoon, the number of men both in the bar and under the verandah was larger than usual, and the conversation was also more animated, a subject of general interest being under discussion.

"It was the liquor killed him, sure enough," said one man, between slow puffs at his pipe.

"Don't be after trying to pull our legs in that way, man," answered Mick O'Regan, who sat in the dust, with his back against the wall and a glass of beer between his knees. "Good liquor never yet killed a man, in my opinion, nor never would—unless a man got enough to drown himself in, and there ain't much chance of that with so many thirsty blokes about."

"It killed Dr. Brown, for all that," persisted the first speaker. "I heard the new doctor bloke who's been doing his work say so."

"What, that boy!" scoffed Mick O'Regan. "Why, he don't even know what liquor is yet."

"It won't be long before he does, then," struck in Bob Gillespie. "For he's going to stay here and carry on the old doctor's practice." Bob had been the late doctor's groom, and was in the know.

"Sure, then, it's truth you're speakin'," Mick O'Regan agreed. "This is the place to teach a man to drink, sure enough, it's meself ought to know it." There was a general laugh at this last remark, but disregarding it, the speaker continued, "and this boy of a doctor will be finding out mighty soon that good liquor is the only thing that makes life worth living around this spot."

"And if he doesn't learn it for himself, Sylvester will soon teach him," chimed in Alec M'Coppin, the hotel-keeper, who stood in the bar doorway.

"It was he broke up poor old Brown. The old man would have kept pretty straight but for him, and now Sylvester will be looking for another mate for his carryings-on, and like as not this new doctor will be the man."

"Like as not he will," assented O'Regan. "But it's not our funeral, Alec, and me glass is empty."

"Plenty more beer in the bar," said the hotel-keeper, retreating inside, followed by the other, with his empty glass in his hand.

Meanwhile the subject of this discussion, Dr. Dick Atkins, was riding slowly along the broad, dusty road which led to Sylvester's place, whither he was bound. He was a young man, little more than twenty-five years old, and he had come to Moonabri some few weeks before when the late doctor had become unfit for work. Now he had decided to stay and carry on the practice; not because the place had any attractions for him, but

because he was young, seeking experience, and lacking in money. He would stay here for a couple of years to get some experience, and perhaps save a little money; then he would return to the great world, and start fighting his way to the front. For he was ambitious, and dreamed dreams.

It would be a period of probation, this stay at Moonabri. He had already begun to realise the awful dullness of the place. There seemed to be nobody there with whom he could be friendly but Sylvester, and deep down in his heart he felt there was something about this man he did not like. But he must have someone to talk to and associate with in his spare moments, which were many, and so he was bound for Sylvester's place now.

Presently it came into view, the shade cast by the broad verandah which ran all round the house looking very inviting after the heat and glare of the road. On arriving he handed the horse over to a boy, and stepped on to the verandah, to encounter a lady seated in a low cane chair reading to a little boy about eight or nine years old.

"I beg your pardon," he began, in some confusion, for he had nearly walked over them. "But coming into this delightful shade after the glare outside makes one feel like an owl in the sunlight."

The lady laughed brightly, and stood up.

"You are Dr. Atkins, I know," she said. "Pray do not apologise, but sit down here and rest. My husband told me to expect you. He had to go out to see about the erection of a windmill. They have been putting down a bore, and hope to get water. But he left instructions that I was to look after you until his return."

Atkins sank down into the comfortable chair pointed out to him, and gazed at his hostess with a feeling of

keen pleasure. She was so different to anybody he had seen since he came to this place. So fresh and pure and sweet. He felt like a traveller might, who, journeying over a sandy desert, comes all at once upon a beautiful rose blooming all alone in the desolate waste. And it was very pleasant to sit there and talk to her, and listen to her voice as she answered him.

"I am afraid you will find Moonabri very dull," she said, but to this the young doctor did not so readily assent now as he would have done half an hour before.

"There are always compensations," he said.

"For some people," she assented. "But I fancy the panacea for curing dulness which is most in vogue here would not meet with your approval."

"What is it?" he asked, more from a desire to hear her voice than to know.

A faint flush spread over her face ere she replied—

"Everybody here drinks," she answered. "There seems to be something in the air. Even strangers acquire it after staying here a few months. I have been here six years, and I know."

"Are you seeking to warn me?" he asked, looking at her with a little smile.

Again she flushed, but this time there was a little anger in it.

"Not at all," she disclaimed. "But here comes my husband."

Atkins rose to greet his host, who had just made his appearance round a corner of the verandah. He was a big, fine-looking man, a little inclined to run to flesh, but looking pretty fit physically.

"Found your way here at last. That's right. Glad to see you. Hope my wife has been looking after you all right," he said in a pleasant voice.

"Thanks. I have been well looked after."

"That's right. But I don't see anything to drink," Sylvester went on. "Didn't you offer the doctor anything, my dear?"

"Nothing for me, thank you," said Atkyns.

"Nothing! Eh?" with surprise. "Well, I will, for I'm as dry as a limekiln."

The young doctor thoroughly enjoyed that evening. Although it was only a few weeks since he left town it seemed ages to him. This was the first evening he had spent away from his own diggings since his arrival at Moonabri, and the change was a very pleasant one. Towards the end of dinner the little boy was admitted into the room, and Atkyns liked Sylvester better from the moment he saw the little chap run up to his father and scramble on to his knee. It was easy to see the warm attachment existing between them, and the young man turned towards Mrs. Sylvester with a smile, to see if she were watching. She was, but just as he turned she half rose in her seat and cried—

"Harry! Harry! Don't give that to the boy."

There was a note of appeal in her voice that made Atkyns start, and, turning his head, he saw that Sylvester had poured out half a glass of wine and was holding it up while the little fellow on his knee stretched out both hands to grasp it. At the sound of his wife's voice he seemed to hesitate a moment as to what he should do; but before he had decided she was standing by his chair, and taking the child from him, carried him out of the room. Sylvester laughed as the door closed behind them, but made no remark on the subject, commencing to talk easily of other matters.

In about half an hour Mrs. Sylvester returned to them, and they adjourned to the drawing-room, where she

played and sang for them. Twice during the evening Atkins caught her gaze resting on himself in what seemed a partly wondering, partly pitying way. He could not forget it, and speculated on it as he rode home alone through the hot night without arriving at any decision. Could he have heard a few words of conversation which took place between Sylvester and his wife as they watched him ride off he might have been enlightened.

"He is such a boy, Harry," said the woman. "Don't lead him astray."

"My dear," answered Sylvester, with his gay laugh, and putting his arm round his wife, "am I given to leading people astray? The only boys I can think of are our boy and the youthful doctor. Whom are you pleading for?"

"Both," she answered.

"Our boy is all right, dear. I won't offer him wine if you'd rather I didn't. Dear little chap."

She kissed him.

"We must look after him together," she said. "But the other?"

"Oh, the other!" said Sylvester, his manner changing from tenderness to indifference. "The other is old enough to look after himself."

Over three years had passed, and in spite of his original determination not to stay for more than two, Dr. Atkins still remained at Moonabri. Several times he had received letters from old friends of his student days, urging him to return and start where there was more chance of succeeding, but he had disregarded the advice thus given, alleging various reasons for remaining where he was, and when his friends in their zeal for his welfare had still persisted in urging his removal, he had choked them off by the simple expedient of leaving their letters unanswered.

There was one other person who also urged him to leave the place and start again somewhere else. This was Mrs. Sylvester. Much of the young doctor's time was spent in her company, and Sylvester, far from being jealous, encouraged the intimacy. The two men had become very good friends. There was no one else in the place with whom either of them cared to associate, and the natural consequence was they depended upon one another for congenial society. And this intimacy had not been without a very marked result on the younger man. The loneliness of the place was accentuated by the amount of spare time he had on his hands, and this, combined with the effects of the climate and Sylvester's company, had been sufficient to make him take refuge in an artificial stimulus to his spirits. In short, he had become a heavy drinker, and it was this that now prevented him leaving Moonabri and starting the practice of his profession elsewhere.

This state of things had only come about very gradually; in fact, so slowly that he had scarcely been conscious of what was happening. Sylvester was a very heavy drinker, but seemingly the spirit never affected him in the slightest, and Atkyns, first more for the sake of companionship than a liking for drink, had fallen into the habit of doing as his companion did, and never awoke to the fact of whither he was tending until he was far down the road whither his predecessor had gone.

Then, indeed, he made a violent effort to pull up, swore he would drink no more, and would avoid Sylvester as much as possible. But this resolution only lasted for about a week; in fact, until Sylvester called at his house for him.

"Haven't seen you for an age," he said. "Come over with me to the races." It was New Year's Day.

"Can't!" said Atkins. "I've got some patients to see."

"Oh, let them wait," said the other lightly. "It's nothing very serious, I'm sure."

"I must see them all the same," was the reply. "Besides, I've sworn off drink."

"What!" gasped Sylvester. "Since when? Why, man alive, you'll never be able to get along without it in a climate like this."

"I'm going to try."

"But you won't refuse it to your friends?"

"The decanter is on the sideboard," answered Atkins, with assumed indifference.

The other walked across the room, and, pouring out a couple of glasses of whisky, drank one.

"I'm just going outside to tell your man to saddle your horse," he said. "Be ready to start by the time I come back, like a good fellow, or we shall miss the first race." Then, without waiting for an answer, he left the room.

In about ten minutes afterwards when he returned he found the young man ready to accompany him. He expressed no surprise at this change of plans, but after one swift glance at the sideboard, where two empty whisky glasses met his gaze, led the way outside, where their horses were waiting for them.

They rode along in silence for some little time. Once or twice Atkins tried to speak, but it was not until he had made several attempts that he succeeded.

"Some day, Sylvester," he said, "there will be a case here requiring my immediate attention, and I shall not be in a fit state to give it."

"And then?" asked the other in a politely inquiring tone.

"Then? Well, I don't exactly care to think what would happen then," was the reply.

"Then don't think of it, my dear chap. It isn't at all likely to occur. Anybody who falls sick can very well afford to wait supposing—mind, I only say supposing—you were not well enough to attend to them at the time."

Atkins made no reply to this. To pursue the subject seemed too much like a confession of his own weakness, so he let it drop, and they talked of other matters.

And this was not the only attempt he made to throw off the vice which was dragging him downwards. Many and varied were the attempts, but the result was always the same, failure. Sylvester was always at hand to tempt him, and even while despising himself for a weakling, Atkins was forced to acknowledge the great power this man had obtained over him. Indeed, he seemed to find amusement in the young doctor's efforts to reform, the one soft spot in his nature being his love for wife and child. Of the boy he was most passionately fond, and in his presence seemed a different man.

So things went on month after month, and the talkers under the hotel and store verandah did not lack conversation whenever Sylvester's or the young doctor's name was mentioned.

And then suddenly, and without a word of warning, came what one of them had always feared and the other had scoffed at.

For some days Sylvester's little son had been ailing, but not sufficiently to cause his parents any alarm, and then all at once the illness took a serious turn, and on reaching home in the evening after being out all day, Sylvester found the house in confusion and his child fighting and gasping for breath in a way that was pitiful to see. A man had been despatched on horseback for the doctor, but in about an hour he returned alone. Sylvester, hearing the horse's feet, rushed out on to the verandah.

"Where's the doctor?" he cried, seeing the messenger was alone. But even before the answer came he knew what it would be.

"I couldn't see him," answered the man. "His man said he wasn't well and was lying down, but he would send him along as soon as ever he could."

Deep down in his heart Sylvester cursed, though he uttered no sound. He well knew what the doctor's indisposition was, and he saw that the man did too. For a moment he considered, then—

"Put the mare in the buggy and have her round here as quick as ever you can. I must go into the townhsip myself."

The man ran off to do as he was bid, and Sylvester entered the house. His wife was standing in the doorway of the boy's room.

"The doctor!" she gasped. "Hasn't he come?"

"He was out, dear," he answered, lying that she might be spared if possible. "But I'm going in now for him myself, and I'll bring him back with me, never fear."

"Oh, be quick, be quick!" she cried.

He stooped and kissed her, then hurried away. The buggy was waiting, and in a minute more he was bowling along the road at the mare's best speed. There was a grim, determined look about his face, and it only reflected what was in his mind. He was going to bring the doctor back with him no matter what it cost. His child's life depended upon speedy medical aid, and there was no other doctor within twenty miles. His boy's life, that was all he thought of, as he whipped up the mare, trying to make her keep pace with his rushing desires.

At last he reached the house, and throwing the reins to the groom, who was leaning over the fence smoking, he dashed inside. It was as he had suspected. On a

couch in his sitting-room lay the doctor sleeping heavily, a half-empty brandy bottle on the table showing what his recent occupation had been. Sylvester stepped over to him, and grasping him by the shoulder, shook him roughly.

"Atkyns! Atkyns! Wake up!" he cried. "You must come with me at once. My boy is dying."

A heavy snore was the only reply he received.

Again and again he tried to rouse the sleeping man, and at last succeeded in getting some sort of an answer to his calls. But it was an unsatisfactory one, and realising that he must act entirely on his own responsibility, Sylvester left the half insensible man, and went into the surgery. He knew the room and its contents well, for he had often been there before, and Atkyns had explained many things to him. Now he looked carefully around, and selecting everything he thought could by any probability be needed he carried them outside, placed them carefully in the trap, and then returned to the sitting-room, only to find Atkyns fast asleep again.

A minute afterwards the groom outside stared to see Sylvester appear in the doorway half supporting, half carrying, the doctor. With considerable difficulty they got him into the trap, and then, after telling the groom to come on behind on horseback in case the doctor should require anything else, Sylvester drove off rapidly towards home.

The drive seemed to revive Atkyns somewhat, and by the time they arrived at the house he was able to descend from the trap with assistance and stagger on to the verandah. Mrs. Sylvester met them at the door.

"Oh, doctor, I'm so thankful to see you——" she began, and then stopped, a look of horror and loathing coming into her face as she realised the state he was in. In piteous appeal she turned to her husband.

"What does this mean, Harry?" she cried.

"It was the best I could do, dear," he answered. "Dr. Atkyns will be better presently." Then turning to the doctor, who only seemed to half understand what was going on around him, he continued—"Pull yourself together, man, for God's sake. You have got to save my boy's life, understand that. Now come and see him," and he led the way to the child's room.

The young doctor followed, and presently stood gazing down at the sick boy, trying hard to regain command of his mental faculties that he might bring his skill to bear that this young life might be saved. For several minutes he struggled hard and made a brief examination, then he turned to the two waiting so anxiously for his verdict, one wild-eyed and nigh distraught with grief, the other stern and calm, giving no outward sign of the fierce tumult raging within him.

"The boy is dying," he said.

The mother gave a cry at the words, but Sylvester seemed unmoved.

"Is there nothing you can do?" he asked.

"An operation might save him," Atkyns replied. He had sunk into a chair, and seemed in danger of going to sleep again.

"Then you must perform it," said Sylvester, with instant decision. "I brought all your things with me in case of this."

"It is impossible," groaned the doctor, with a flush of shame rising to his face. He glanced at the mother, but she was bending over her child. "In this state I dare not attempt it."

"But you must, man, you must."

"It would be murder! Look at my hands."

The other looked and groaned. It was too true. In such a state the man was unfit to attempt anything.

"How long have we?" he asked.

"A few hours at most."

"Too short to get help elsewhere?"

Atkins nodded.

"Give me a few hours' sleep to recover myself a bit, and I will attempt it," he said.

"But it may be too late."

"It probably will be, but it is the only chance."

Then for a moment Sylvester lost command of himself.

"Curse you, you drunken brute!" he whispered. "My boy is to die because you cannot keep away from the brandy bottle."

At the sound of this terrible indictment the other started and tried to straighten himself up. But it was a weak attempt, and failed.

"It is your own fault," he mumbled weakly. "You led me on."

It was too true, and with a terrible pang at his heart Sylvester realised it. He glanced round as if undecided, then uttering the word "Come!" he led the way from the room. Once outside, he turned—

"I will give you three hours," he said; "and then if the boy is alive you must attempt it. I will wake you when the time is up."

Then he left him.

Slowly the time went by to the miserable man pacing up and down the garden outside. He dare not go to the sick room for fear of learning the worst. Many times he went and gazed into the room where the doctor was sleeping heavily, and each time he cursed him in his heart. Cursed himself as well, for now he realised he was the cause of it all, that but for him the doctor would have been in a fit state to perform the operation at once, and the boy's life would have been saved.

It was such a time as few men have to go through, and when at last it was over, and he shook the sleeping man by the shoulder, saying, "The time is up. Come," his face was grey and lined in a way years would not be sufficient to efface.

In silence they made their way to the sick room, and entered. The mother was sitting by the bed with her face buried in her hands, but she looked up as they entered.

"The doctor will try now, dear," Sylvester began.

But the woman shook her head.

"Go!" she said. "Go! Both of you. It is too late now. The boy is dead."

THE WAY OF HIS WOOING

“WELL, boys, that’s the last one this afternoon for me,” said Jack Gemmell, putting his glass on the bar counter, and proceeding to cut a pipeful of tobacco from his plug. “I must be off.”

There was a chorus of disapproval from the group of men assembled in the bar-room of the Welcome Nugget Hotel, for it was summer and Saturday, and, therefore, a legitimate occasion for liquid rejoicing. The thermometer stood at 105 deg. under the verandah outside, so there were several reasons, if anyone had needed them, why this half-dozen or so bearded and bronzed men should find it necessary to consume much strong liquor.

Mick Ryan voiced the feeling of the company when he spoke. “Jack, me boy,” he said, “it’s nothing else but ——— foolishness leaving this here spot, where there’s plenty of good liquor and good company, to go outside into blazing sun that’s fit to burn the clothes off a man’s back. Besides, it’s me birthday, or I choose to celebrate it as such ; so fill up your glass again, and let’s have no more talk of ‘last ones’ until the moon begins to rise.”

“My oath ! That’s the way to talk,” assented another, pushing his glass towards the barman. “This weather makes me so dry I can’t even spit,” and as if in emphatic

confirmation of this remark he immediately gave ocular demonstration to the contrary.

But Jack Gemmell only shook his head, and gave a laughing refusal to their invitations.

"No, boys. I'm fond enough of the liquor, as you all know, but I've had enough for to-day, and, besides, though I'm always glad to have a drink with any of you, and to stand my shout, I'm going to keep sober in future."

This statement was so surprising that Mick Ryan emptied a glass of beer belonging to one of the other men without taking breath, and then stared at the others in hopeless amazement.

"By St. Patrick, but it's truly amazin'!" he gasped. "You will never do it, me boy; you'll die in the attempt."

But Jack Gemmell did not hear him. He was standing on the verandah outside, lighting his pipe, and gazing as he did so down the long, white, dusty road that ran through the township of Henderson's. In the bar the glare of the sun had been somewhat tempered, even if the heat were not much less, but outside the glare was dazzling, and swarms of flies buzzed about his horse, which was hitched up to one of the verandah posts. Two or three dogs lay in the shade of the verandah, with their tongues hanging out, trying to sleep in the intervals of snapping angrily at the flies.

Having lighted his pipe, he unhitched his horse, and, mounting, rode slowly down the road in the direction of his farm, which lay some ten miles out.

He was a fine healthy-looking young man of about twenty-eight, and this afternoon there was a pleased, expectant look on his face, as he puffed at his pipe, and watched the pale blue smoke rise slowly in the hot, still air. He had not proceeded more than half a mile when he

was roused by the sound of horses' hoofs behind him, and a man, who had been one of his companions in the bar-room, rode up at a canter, and drew rein at his side. Jack Gemmell did not look pleased when he saw who it was, but he straightened up in the saddle and returned the man's greeting.

"You had enough, too, Little?" he asked. "I thought you were fixed for the day."

"So I thought, too," answered Tom Little, watching his companion sharply, "until you left, then I thought it was time for me to be moving along."

"Did a sudden desire for temperance seize you when you saw me leave the bar sober?" said Jack, with a shade of bitterness in his voice.

"Well, yes, it did," answered the other, carelessly, flicking the flies off his horse's neck with a stick. "But not for the reason you suppose."

"What was the reason then?"

"Well, you see, a sober man is better than a man drunk, and as you were sober, I wanted to be sober too."

"I don't yet see why," said Jack, not looking at his companion. "But it's no matter."

"Well, I'll tell you, then," giving his horse a kick with his heel to make it keep pace with his companion. "You are courting Minnie Graham, and so am I. If you take too much liquor, I don't mind joining you, but I'm not going to let you have the advantage of being sober when I'm drunk."

"I see," said Jack, expressively. "Well, Little, see here! We are a couple of brutes, and neither of us is fit for her."

"Perhaps not," returned the other. "But for all that, I'm going to get her if I can."

"So am I."

Both men rode on in silence for some time until they

came to a branch road. This was Jack's way home, but he did not take it this afternoon. The other glanced at him.

"Changed your place of residence, Gemmell?"

"No, but I'm not going there now; I'm going up to Graham's."

"Going to propose, eh?"

"If I get the chance, I certainly shall."

"You'll not get the chance if I can help it. I'm going there too."

Jack Gemmell made no answer to this, only his mouth hardened a little as he watched the bare, brown paddocks between which they were passing. Tom Little whistled a lively tune for a minute, and then dropping his reins on his horse's neck he began to fill his pipe, all the time watching his companion out of the corner of his eye.

"See here, Little!" burst out Jack, after they had ridden some way in silence. "We can't fight over Minnie in front of her, can we?"

"That depends upon you," answered the other, puffing slowly at his pipe. He had expected his companion to make some proposition, and smiled to himself as he saw it coming.

"Will you toss up to decide who is to speak to her first?"

The other pondered a moment.

"If you win when will you speak to her? I'm ready to marry her at once, and don't want to be kept in suspense."

"This very afternoon," answered Jack, eagerly, drawing a coin from his pocket.

"Right you are, then! Toss away!"

Both men dismounted and stood in the dusty road with the bridles over their arms, while with his free hand Jack spun a coin into the air.

"Tails," called Little, as the coin fell into the dust, and they bent over it in anxiety to see the result.

"Tails it is, by the living jingo!" he shouted, slapping his thigh with his hand. "Ride back, Gemmell, there's no good you coming on now. If Minnie won't have me I'll let you know, and you can ride over to-morrow and propose."

Jack pocketed his coin in silence, mounted his horse, with a "so-long," rode slowly back the way he had come, while Tom Little stood still in the roadway with a pleased smile on his face, watching his rival's figure grow smaller in the distance.

"You won't need to ride over to-morrow, Jack, my boy, if I know anything of Minnie," he mused as he mounted his horse.

And he was right, for that same evening Minnie Graham promised to become the wife of Tom Little, who was so pleased with his success that he went several miles out of his way home that he might see how his disappointed rival took the news.

"Congratulate me, Jack!" he cried, in the exuberance of his spirits. "Have you got a drop of liquor in the house to celebrate the event with? You look as if a nip or two wouldn't do you any harm."

Gemmell led the way into his house and produced a bottle of whisky, and it was late when his guest at last mounted his horse and rode away singing through the calm, summer night.

Jack spent some weeks at home in his own company instead of at the Graham's farm as he had hoped. For some time he avoided the township, and his friends at the Welcome Nugget looked for him in vain. But Tom Little, well pleased at his success, was more often there than the well-being of his farm seemed to warrant, and there were not voices wanting to wish Minnie Graham

joy of her bargain, and to hint that though Jack Gemmell was a bit wild and fond of liquor, he would have made her a better husband than the one she had chosen.

But these remarks made no difference to Minnie, for the very good reason that they did not reach her ears. She seldom came to Henderson's, and old Graham, her father, was not the sort of man that idle talkers would choose as a listener. So the preparations for the marriage went on undisturbed by any misgiving on the girl's part, and one day early in February, when Jack dropped in at the bar of the Welcome Nugget for a drink and a yarn, the news was shot at him that Tom Little's wedding was to be in a few weeks. It was well known that he had been a rival suitor for Minnie's hand, though the particulars of the "tossing" had never been made public, and the men were anxious to see how he took his defeat.

"Cheer up, me boy," said Mick Ryan, clapping him on the shoulder. "I was disappointed in love years ago as a lad, but, lor' bless you, I've forgotten all about it long ago."

The other men in the bar were listening, so Jack answered with a loud laugh, and shouted drinks all round in a reckless way that betrayed to a keen observer the feeling he was trying to hide. On the same principle he accepted an invitation to the wedding festivities, and was the most lively, though scarcely the happiest member of the party. Dancing was kept up till daylight, and as the guests were departing in the early dawn it was found that Jack Gemmell was unable to mount his horse, and so a friendly neighbour gave him a place in the bottom of his waggon, putting him down at his farm to sleep off the effects of the wedding festivities.

The months sped by, and before another summer was over old Graham was dead, and Minnie was the mother

of a baby boy. Jack heard of it at the Welcome Nugget, for he never went over to Little's farm, though Tom often pressed him to do so when they met in the bar-room, which was not seldom. He also heard that the old man's farm had been heavily mortgaged, and that Minnie and her husband would gain nothing from her father's estate but debts.

"Me boy, she was not such a catch as the both of ye seemed to think," said Mick Ryan one day over a friendly glass of beer, "and Tom will have to stick a deal closer to his farm and work a long sight harder if he wants to pay off the mortgage that's on his own little place."

"How do you know there's a mortgage on his place?" asked Jack.

"How do I know, me boy! Why I have his own word for sure, for though Tom is like meself, and hates to be bound down by facts, yet it's the truth I'm telling you now, the devil take me if it isn't!"

Jack was very thoughtful as he rode home that afternoon. He gave little enough attention to his own place, yet his luck had been good, and he was free of a mortgage, and had money in the bank besides. And yet it seemed that Little was getting into difficulties through the same mode of life. He had seen Minnie only once since her marriage, but his love for her was the same as ever, and the idea of poverty coming to her made him very thoughtful.

For some weeks he avoided Henderson's, and then one day, meeting Little at a cattle sale, they adjourned for a drink.

"Have another?" said Jack, when the first was finished, and as Little consented, they had several "anothers," until presently he became communicative to his old rival, and told him—only more fully—what Jack had already

heard from Mick Ryan in the bar-room of the Welcome Nugget. The latter listened in silence, but all the while a plan was forming in his brain. Minnie had been a fool in accepting Tom Little for a husband, but she had done so, and now it was too late to repent. "I must have some money, or the place will be sold," Little had said, and Jack had already determined to lend it to him—not for his own sake, but that Minnie should be saved from poverty and perhaps from being turned out of her home; for Jack still loved her dearly, and for her sake would try to help Little to keep his head above water.

Tom was profuse in his thanks when he heard of the proposed loan, and suggested they should celebrate it in another drink. But this Jack objected to.

"See here, Tom!" he said, "if I lend you this bit of money you must keep off the drink, or it will only go the way of the rest. I tell you straight that it's for Minnie's sake I do it, and if you were not her husband I'd see you damned before I'd lend you a penny."

And so Tom Little promised—promises were easy to him—and in due time the money was paid over, and for a while things seemed to be going more smoothly. Jack seldom went into Henderson's now, devoting most of his time to his farm, and imagining that Little was doing the same. A couple of times he met Minnie driving along the road with her baby boy, but he never did more than pass the time of day with her and ride on his way. And thus it came about that for many months he saw and heard nothing of Tom Little, until one summer day he paid one of his now infrequent visits to the Welcome Nugget, and heard what had been taking place since he was last there.

"Me boy!" said Mick Ryan, sententiously, pushing his glass across the bar to be refilled, "drink's a terrible thing, take me word for it, because I ought to know.

Me father died of it when I was only a slip of a lad, and I very near once died for the want of it, so now I lay in a good stock when I have the chance." Here Mick paused to sample the replenished glass, and Jack had to wait until he was satisfied to hear the cause of this exordium.

"There's Tom Little now," Mick Ryan went on, laying down his glass regretfully, "he'd never have come to the end he did but for drink, and it was taking too little that brought the mischief about. If he'd only taken another glass or two he'd have been about and well to-day like you and I, instead of lying over there"—and Mick turned his thumb in a direction supposed to indicate Little's farm—"with a broken neck. A few more drinks would have made him too drunk to move or mount his horse and so saved his life."

"What the devil do you mean?" asked Jack, in astonishment. "Tom Little with a broken neck?"

"I mean that sure enough," answered Mick. "And only last night it happened."

"How?"

"Well, me boy, some few months ago, when you started to live the life of a hermit out at your own little place, Tom got a tidy lump of money from somewhere, and since then he's been fairly living here, and shouting for everybody that came into the place. I've had a good few with him meself, but I always returned his shout." Here he paused and seemed to reflect a little before resuming his narrative. "His wife came in once or twice with the baby and tried to fetch him away. But it was not much use, for though he always went with her, the next day he would be back again. Yesterday he was in and out all day, and about seven o'clock he started to ride home on a wild young horse. He could scarcely mount, and I can't help thinking that if we'd had only one more drink

together he'd never have reached the saddle, and so have been alive now." Again he paused and examined his pipe carefully. "That was the last we saw of him alive, but this morning they found him, lying on the road near his own gate, with his neck broken."

Such was Mick Ryan's story, told in a plain, unvarnished way, and Jack, reading between the lines, guessed at what the story of Minnie's life must have been for the last few months. He longed to go to her and offer his help in those things which a man can do in such a time of trouble, but he feared to do so. Late in the day he rode slowly home alone, thinking of her and his dead rival.

Months passed by, while Jack worked hard on his farm, seldom going to the township, for now he had a new reason for wishing to prosper. Minnie was a widow, and he was only waiting for her year of mourning to expire before he asked her to be his wife. She was still living on the old farm, so much he knew from common gossip, but the mortgage fell due that summer, and if she could not pay it the place would be sold. This latter piece of information she had given him herself when they had met one day in the township, and Jack had ridden part of the way back alongside the trap which Minnie was driving.

He had longed to speak to her that afternoon, but bravely restrained himself, for the year of probation was not over, and he did not wish to imperil his chance by speaking too soon.

And so he waited until spring was passed, and then one hot, summer afternoon rode over and asked Minnie to be his wife.

The same evening he appeared at the Welcome Nugget after a long absence, and the loafers in the bar had a

good time that night. He "shouted" for every man there many times over, and in the small hours of the morning rode home at a gallop, shouting wild hallos, that echoed through the still, hot night.

That was his last appearance in Henderson's, and a few weeks later the news went abroad that Jack Gemmell had gone to South Africa, and that his farm was to be sold.

Minnie heard the news, and knew that it was her refusal to marry him which had driven him away. But she had scarcely expected him to go away without pressing his suit more ardently. Perhaps if he had come back again the next day she might have accepted him, though she told herself she was not in love with any man. But he did not come back, and another trouble daily becoming more pressing made her forget all about Jack for the time.

This trouble was the probability that she might lose the farm when the mortgage fell due in a few months, as she was quite unable to pay the amount owing. The place was a good one, but Tom Little had borrowed on it until he could borrow no more, and now the mortgagee said he must sell.

Minnie tried hard to stave off this disaster, working early and late at her own duties, and overlooking the work of her two hired men. Then she begged for time, and it was granted, but even this was only a temporary respite, and when her boy was just two years old the mortgagee foreclosed, and the place was advertised for sale.

Then, when at last all hope seemed gone, and she was preparing to leave, what seemed to her a miracle happened. The money owing was paid, she was told she must not inquire by whom, and the farm and stock settled on her without a penny of debt.

It seemed at first too good to be true, but as the months went by she began to realise that it was so, and almost unconsciously her thoughts began to turn to Jack. If he came back and again asked her to become his wife would she accept him? She scarcely knew. But it was never likely to happen, for no news had come of him since he went away, and there was nothing to make him return.

But, far over the sea, in a strange country, Jack Gemmell's thoughts turned to his own land, and at last one day, when over five years were passed, weary and sick, he dragged his aching body to Minnie's door and knocked.

He was so changed by the years and sickness that he fancied she would not know him, and that he might rest there a little, and then tramp on again.

But he was wrong.

"Jack!" she cried, with both hands outstretched towards him. "Jack!"

He reeled, and would have fallen, but for her strong arm.

"Come inside," she said.

He hesitated.

"It is your house," she protested. "I knew it was your money saved it for me. It is all yours now, if you will have it, Jack; only come in and let me nurse you back to health."

"And you, Minnie?" he asked.

"Oh, Jack! I thought you would never come back," she cried. "I seem to have been waiting for you so long."

Then the man stooped and kissed her, and they entered the house together.

HIS PROMISE

“IT is perfectly disgusting what beasts some men delight in making themselves,” said John Beresford, as he took his seat at the breakfast table.

His wife looked up quickly, noticing that he spoke with something approaching to anger in his voice, which was usually calm and good tempered.

“Why, father, what has upset you?” she asked, pouring out his coffee, and rising from her chair to take it to him.

“It is that man Shaw again, little woman,” he answered.

“Not drunk, John, surely? He promised, you know, the last time.”

“Yes, I remember!” John Beresford interrupted. “I was a fool to trust him, but the man had been with us so long, since before Nell was born, and when things were not so prosperous as they are now, that out of mere sentiment I gave him another chance when any other man would have gone packing. But it was no use. Last night he went down to the township and, not content with getting drunk there, he must needs bring a bottle of whisky back with him, and fall to drinking it in the hut until he can scarcely move. It is demoralising those lads there as well. But I’ve ended it once and for all. He goes this afternoon.”

Mrs. Beresford heaved a little sigh, for she pitied the man, who, when "off the drink," was a faithful, willing servant, and besides, as her husband had said, he had been with them when times were bad, and it seemed hard to send him away now.

She was considering how best to plead for the man with her husband, when a tall girl of about sixteen entered the room.

"Oh, father!" she cried, seating herself at the table, "is it true Shaw has been drinking again?"

"Too true, my dear!" he answered, gazing at her fondly. "But we won't talk about it. He is going away to-day."

"Do you mean that you have dismissed him?"

"There was nothing else for it," answered John Beresford, doggedly.

"Oh, but you must forgive him, Dad!" cried the young girl, impulsively, her large eyes full of sympathy. "Have you forgotten how he pulled me out of the dam, when but for him I must have been drowned; it was on my sixth birthday, I remember; and then when Dandy fell with you at the ditch and broke your leg, how he brought you home, and then rode twenty miles for the doctor?"

"My dear, I have forgotten none of these things," answered her father, "but the man must go, or we shall have every hand on the place following his example."

"And I say you must forgive him," persisted Nell, with a pretty assumption of dignity. "Do this for me, Dad," she went on, rising and putting her arms around his neck, "and I promise you he shall not offend again."

It was difficult for John Beresford to refuse his only daughter anything, so in the end she gained her point, and Shaw was forgiven.

After the meal was over, Nell donned a large straw hat as a protection against the hot sun, and went down to the men's hut to tell Shaw of his reprieve. She found the man rolling up his swag, and preparing to tramp away in search of work elsewhere.

He looked up in a shamefaced way as she called his name from the doorway.

"Yes, Miss Nell," he said. I'm going to hump my bluey now. The boss has been very good, better'n I deserve."

"No, Shaw!" she answered, "you can unroll your blankets. Papa has promised me to forgive you this time, and I have promised for you that you will not offend again."

The man looked up in surprise at the fair young creature standing there in the doorway before him. And this girl so beautiful and good could find it in her heart to plead for a poor degraded man like himself. Rough and hard as he was, the thought almost overcame him, and, drawing his coat-sleeve across his eyes, he muttered, "God bless you, Miss Nell, for taking pity on a poor man!"

"But you must promise to keep straight in the future," she answered, trying to speak sternly. "Remember I have given my word for you; if you disgrace yourself, you disgrace me, too."

"I promise, Miss Nell!" he answered, huskily. "God help me, I promise to keep straight for your sake."

The long, hot summer's day was drawing to a close as Shaw slowly made his way from the men's hut to the house. Nell was standing on the verandah looking across the bare, brown paddocks at the smoke of some distant bush fires.

"Where are the men?" she asked on seeing him.

"They've gone to help save Beamish's house from the fire, Miss Nell," he replied, "but I'm afraid it's no use, for the wind is strong and blowing right in their direction."

The girl gave a little sigh ere she replied. "The doctor has just been, and says mother is much better; but there are two or three things she must have, and I thought one of the boys could go to the township and get them."

"Lord knows when any of them will be back," answered the man, "but that needn't trouble you, for I'll go across and get them now."

Just for an instant the girl looked doubtful, and the man caught the look.

"Don't you be afraid, Miss Nell; I won't get into any trouble, but just come back here as quick as ever I can."

"Thank you, Shaw," she answered. "I will go and make out a list of what I want."

An hour later the man had covered the three miles which lay between the Beresford's farm and the township, and proceeded to make his purchases. The last article on the list was a bottle of whisky, and for this he had to go to the public-house.

On entering it he was greeted by several, who pressed him to drink, but, firmly declining their invitations, he bought the whisky and set out on his way homewards.

For the first mile or so his way was along the road, but then, in order to shorten the journey, he turned aside through a belt of heavy timber. A bush fire had swept through it a few days before, burning all the undergrowth and leaving only the large trees standing, all black and charred, some few yet burning. He had almost reached the end of it, when suddenly, without a moment's warning, a great limb which the fire had been slowly devour-

ing, no longer able to support its own weight, gave way, and with a great, tearing crash fell to the ground, striking the defenceless man to the earth, and pinning him there by its weight.

For hours he lay there insensible, until with the early dawn consciousness returned. He tried to move, but sank back with a low moan. The limb lay across his left leg and arm, pressing them into the ground with cruel, relentless weight. His right leg was broken, and only his other arm was free. The pain of trying to move was so great that he fainted, and the sun was high before consciousness again returned. Then the burning rays of the sun beating on his unprotected head added to his fearful position. Very carefully he felt about with his right hand for his hat, which had fallen off; but he could not move it far, and no success rewarded his efforts. Suddenly his hand touched something hard, and turning his head slowly and painfully to one side, he could see that it was the bottle of whisky. The upper portion was broken off, evidently by some part of the fallen limb, but the rest was lying within reach of his hand, propped up against a piece of wood, and still half full of whisky.

With a muttered curse—poor fellow, he knew no better—he turned his head away. His hat would have been some protection against the burning rays of the sun, which beat down on his head pitilessly.

Presently he began shouting out in the hope that someone would hear and come to his assistance. But it was vain! His voice seemed to ascend into the burning sky overhead, and not even an echo answered him.

The sun rose higher and higher, and then, oh, horror! the ants had discovered him, and were crawling over him in thousands. With his one free hand he tried to brush them off, but they came on in swarms, and would not be denied.

Then his gaze fell again on the bottle of whisky. Ah, that would give him strength to hold out until help came, and he moved out his hand to take it. But the thought of his promise stayed his hand. He had promised Miss Nell never to touch the drink again, and he recalled her words: "Remember, I have given my word for you; if you disgrace yourself, you disgrace me, too."

No! No! he would not do that. At all costs he must be faithful with Miss Nell. And he turned his head away, lest the sight should be too much for him.

But a fearful thirst began to take possession of him. His throat and mouth were parched and dry, and almost unconsciously his hand groped for the bottle which lay so near, and promised some relief to his sufferings. But with a muttered curse he conquered the inclination, and withdrew his hand, and again sought to brush away the swarm of ants which crawled over him.

The sun rose higher and higher, and the very air seemed to palpitate with the fierce heat. Still, no one came to bring him relief. What would Miss Nell be thinking when she found he did not return? Would she think he was drunk and had broken his promise to her? This thought was the culminating point of his sufferings, and he began talking deliriously. "God bless yer, Miss Nell, for taking pity on a poor man." And again, "I promise, Miss Nell! God 'elp me! I promise to keep straight for your sake."

Slowly the long, hot day drew to a close, with the poor, suffering creature lying there pinned to the earth, raving in delirium of scenes long past and forgotten until now; but even in this extremity conscious of, and determined to adhere to, the promise made to the girl who had pleaded for him.

And with the rising of the moon came help. Strong

hands removed the log, and those hands tender as strong, laid him on a mattress, and bound something cool on his poor aching head.

Presently he revived, and looking round on the brown, bearded faces about him, cried, "Where's Miss Nell?"

She was there at his side, kneeling on the burnt, parched earth. The others drew off a little, and watched them.

"I kep' my promise, Miss Nell," he muttered, brokenly. "'Twas the tree as broke the bottle, not me. I never touched a drop."

"I know, Shaw. You kept your promise like a man and a gentleman," she answered, with tears in her eyes.

His, now fast glazing, lighted up at her words. "God bless yer, Miss Nell!" he gasped. "I kep' straight for your sake. Tell the boss that," and then Shaw set out on his last journey with that unbroken promise to light him on his way.

HER CHRISTMAS HOLIDAY

SCHOOL was over for the day and for the year, and with a noisy shout of delight at the idea of freedom from irksome lessons in a hot schoolroom the children rushed into the bare playground that surrounded the little State school of Dry Creek, and prepared to make the best of their month's holiday.

The school house was built on a bare hillside in Gippsland, made unlovely by the ringed trees all around, which lifted their naked, white arms to heaven in endless, unavailing protest, or so at least it seemed to Mabel Wheeler as she came to the door of the school, and stood watching the children as they dispersed on their several ways home.

She was young—far too young to be away teaching in a school that was several miles from the nearest township, and where she could have few or none of those nameless little things which help so much to make life pleasant to a young girl; but departmental ways are hard, and she had to earn her own living.

She gave a little sigh, part weariness and part relief, as the last child disappeared. For a whole year she had been teaching in this lonely spot, with no society but the children and the woman and her husband with whom she boarded. And Dave Bolden could by no stretch of the imagination be deemed "society" for anyone, not even for his wife, as after a long and hard day's work he usually went to sleep in his chair even before his after-

dinner pipe was finished, and his overworked wife had her hands full with the charge of four young children, to say nothing of household duties, and attending to the fowls and ducks, giving a hand at the milking, and other duties too numerous to mention. And so the girl had found life pretty lonely. True, there were always the four small children as companions, but after teaching youngsters all day long she was not often in the mood for their society after school hours. So she had been thrown back on her own resources entirely, and as books were hard to get, there was very little to do save go for a walk. And in the winter time it was often too wet to go walking; to the lonely girl it sometimes seemed to rain for weeks together, and then she was forced to spend most of her spare time in her own small bedroom, reading the few books she had—old favourites most of them—and in writing long, long letters to Jim, who was away in the West, working hard trying to make enough to start a little home of his own, when he was going to send for her, and she was going over to him and be his wife, and then all her troubles would be ended. Those long, long letters were the greatest comfort of her life, and in them she poured out all the things she would have said had there been anybody by to whom she could have said them. And yet not quite all. She never told Jim how altogether lonely she was, for she was afraid. "He would send for me at once if he knew," she told herself, "and I don't want to go to him until he is quite ready. I don't want to be a burden to him, so I must be brave, and wait a little longer."

There were other letters, too, besides those to Jim, but they were not so long or so frequent. These were to her brother Bob, who lived in the city, and was in his own estimation that extremely vague sort of individual, a man about town. They had been left orphans some

years before, and though it was hard necessity had forced the girl to become a State school teacher, she was glad not to be compelled to live with her brother for more than a few weeks at a time. She had tried hard to excuse his faults and to put up with him because he was her brother, but his innate selfishness stung her to the quick, and was fast killing her affection for him. Short as her letters had been to him, they were always kind, yet he often omitted to answer them unless he happened to be in want of money to pay for some extravagance, when he did not fail to write and ask for what he needed, and which the girl had never yet found it in her heart to refuse him, though it often meant that she had herself to go without some much-needed article.

Yet she never reproached him, and this afternoon she was feeling so tired and lonely that the thought of having even Bob as a companion for the next few weeks seemed to comfort her a little. For she was going down to the city for her Christmas holidays, though the railway journey was an expensive one, and would make a serious hole in the contents of her purse, to say nothing of the extra expense of living in town for a month. But then Christmas only came once a year, as did the holidays, and she felt that to stay up there in Gippsland for those four weeks with nothing to look at but the bare ringed trees, and barer school and yard, in order that she might save a few pounds was more than she could stand. No! she must go down to town, and get a breath of real life, and see the shops gay with their show of Christmas goods, even if she had to deny herself other things when the holiday was over.

Her heart grew a little lighter at the thought, and she closed the door behind her, and walked across the dusty playground towards the Boldens' house, which was some two or three hundred yards away. "For a whole month,"

she thought, "I shall be free, and have something else to look at but this dreary school, and perhaps—perhaps—before the month is over Jim may write and say he is ready for me, and then I need never see this hateful place again." She gave a happy little sigh at the thought, and then quickened her pace, for the boy with the mail was at the Boldens' door.

"Anything for me, Billy?" she called when she was near enough.

"One!" answered Billy. He was not given to wasting words.

She took it from him, and glanced at the hand-writing hastily; then a look of disappointment came over her face, and she turned to the boy, who was refreshing himself from a "billy" of water after his long and dusty walk.

"Are you sure there is nothing else for me?" she asked, anxiously.

"Wouldn't I 'ave given it to yer if there was?" he answered, and, after this unusually long speech, found it necessary to refresh himself with another drink.

The girl turned away and entered the house with a sick, disappointed feeling at her heart. She had been counting on a letter from Jim, a Christmas letter, and only now when it didn't come was she aware of how much she had counted on it. She knew there was a mail in from the West, and Jim had never missed sending his weekly letter before.

What could be the matter? Was he ill? She sat down on the side of the bed in her own hot, stuffy little room, and speculated on the letter that had not come while she held the one that had arrived crushed up in her hand. It was only from her brother Bob, saying probably that he would meet her at the train, for she had written a few days before telling him the day she was coming down.

But presently she opened it, rather wearily, for Bob's letters were never interesting, and her head had commenced to ache. It was short and to the point, for if Bob had one gift it was knowing how to ask for what he wanted. And he wanted something now, and in a way the girl recognised with a sinking heart, he asked his sister to supply the want. Only it was a little more serious now. Before it had been £5 he had asked for; this time it was £10. Ten pounds was the sum she had saved to pay her railway fare down to town, give her a month's holiday, and buy the few small things she could not do without. And now Bob wrote asking for it all. In the calmest way he said he must have it to pay a debt which if not satisfied would cost him his "billet," and that as he was going into the country "on business" for a few weeks there would not be much use in her coming down to town for Christmas to be alone; so she might as well spend her holiday where she was, and save the money; then she could easily lend him the £10 he wanted.

It was a selfish, heartless letter, and the girl shed tears over it as she read. Then a great feeling of indignation at his meanness rose up in her heart to think that he should consider her so little.

"If he only knew how lonely it is," she sighed, "he would not have asked me to do this."

Then the thought of spending Christmas, and that holiday to which she had so long looked forward, with the Boldens almost overcame her. The school house and the hillside, with all its ugly rung trees, seemed hateful to her, and she felt she could not do without a change, even if Bob had for once in his life to go without what he wanted.

Suddenly there came a knock at the door, and Mrs. Bolden called to her.

"If you please, Miss, I wish you'd come and look at

my Myrtle; she seems real queer, and I can't make out what ails her."

"All right. I'll come in one moment," she answered, rousing herself from the thought of her own troubles to answer another's cry for help, and, pausing only to bathe her eyes in cold water to hide the signs of her tears, she followed the woman to another room, where Myrtle, a small maid of about five, lay on a bed looking indeed very sick.

She had small experience of illness, but the knowledge of such things that comes intuitively to most women was hers in a large degree.

"She says her throat's sore and her head hot," said the mother, retailing these not uncommon symptoms to the girl with a vague hope that she might at once be able to diagnose the disease.

But Mabel Wheeler, after feeling the child's hot forehead and pulse, shook her head.

"I'm afraid she has got a fever, Mrs. Bolden. You ought to send for Dr. Black."

"How we are to pay him for coming, I'm sure I don't know," said the poor mother. "But sent for he shall be this very moment if that boy Billy is within sound of my voice."

Billy heard the shouts, and was duly despatched for Dr. Black from the township, some four miles away, and Mabel sat by the sick child, so that the over-worked mother could see to her household affairs. She thought over Bob's letter as she sat there, and in a softer mood, induced by the sight of the suffering child, she had almost decided to send the money and give up her holiday in town, when the doctor arrived.

"Diphtheria," he said, when he had finished his examination. "The child would be better at a hospital, but how to get her there is the question. Can you nurse her?"

"I'll do my best, sir!" answered the poor mother, wiping her eyes—her life was a hard one at best. "But I've got many things to see to; what with the other children and the cows, and fowls, to say nothing of keeping the house straight, I've got my hands full, but I'll do my best by her, God knows!"

The doctor pulled his moustache, and looked doubtfully at the sick child.

"She will need very careful nursing," he said; "but I don't see what else we can do unless you get a trained nurse."

"Oh, sir! times is bad——," began Mrs. Bolden, now crying unrestrainedly. But she was interrupted by Mabel, who had been standing with her back to them looking out of the window. Now her mind was made up, so she turned and spoke.

"I will nurse the child, Doctor, if you will tell me what to do. School ended to-day, so there is nothing to prevent me."

The doctor's brow cleared as he turned and looked at the girl, but Mrs. Bolden made a feeble protest.

"But, miss! Your holiday?"

"Don't worry about that," she answered, gently.

"But you was going down to town the day after to-morrow!"

"I was, but now I shall stay to nurse Myrtle. Please tell me what I am to do," she went on, turning to the doctor.

He gave her careful instructions, while Mrs. Bolden poured out incoherent expressions of gratitude. It was not his place to interfere if this girl chose to give up her Christmas holiday to look after a sick child. He wanted a nurse, and had got one, so he gave his instructions and left, promising to call again the next day.

And so Mabel took up the duties of nurse in the sick

room to fight a grim battle with the great King Death during those long, hot summer days of the holiday which she had looked forward to spending in such a different way.

The first morning she left her patient for a little while that she might go to the post office and send Bob the money he had asked for. She was in a very tender mood now—tender towards even this selfish brother who never considered her; but after this one excursion she only left the child to take a short walk at the doctor's orders and to get the necessary sleep.

And so the anxious days sped by, but no word came from Jim. She wrote to him as usual, and waited anxiously for his letter, which never came. The child progressed favourably under her careful nursing, but the nurse herself felt sick at heart with care and anxiety. Jim must be ill was always her thought; never for a moment did she even consider the possibility of his being tired and wishing to break the engagement. But it was a weary, anxious time, and the girl grew pale and wan under the stress of anxiety and nursing.

But at last came a day when the doctor spoke.

"I think we can give you a holiday now," he said to the girl. "Mrs. Bolden can do all that is needed, and if we tax you any more we shall have you falling sick too. Go away for a change; the seaside would be best. Good-bye," and he mounted his horse, for he was a busy man, with many patients to visit.

She watched him go with a faint sense of amusement at his suggestion that she should go away for a change. It was so easy to suggest and so impossible to carry out without the money, and her ten pounds had gone to supply Bob's needs, and he had not yet written to thank her for it. The doctor disappeared round a bend in the road, and then, knowing Mrs. Bolden was with the child, the

girl got her hat, and wandered along a track that led to some fern gullies. Presently she reached one, and choosing the shadiest spot she could find, for the sun was hot, sat down with her back to a tree to rest.

Now that the anxiety of nursing was over she had more time to think of Jim. Four weeks had passed without a letter from him, and he had never missed a week before. A great fear tugged at her heart. He must be dead, nothing else could keep him from writing to her. And then at the thought utter desolation seemed to fall on her, and, overcome by weariness and anxiety, she cried—

“Oh, Jim, dear Jim, come to me. If you only knew how lonely and tired I am you would come!”

A laughing jackass which had been seated on a bough close by watching her broke into a long laugh, as if in mockery, and the sound helped the girl to regain her self-control. What was the use of breaking down? It would only make her ill, and in another week the holidays would be over, and she must start teaching again. They hadn't been much like holidays—the holidays she had planned—but almost anything was better than the hot school-house and the noisy children. Once she had thought Jim might come for her before school began again, but now he seemed farther off than ever.

And then in one moment all things were changed, for not five yards away was Jim striding towards her with his hands stretched out.

“Jim!” she called, faintly, and began to tremble.

“Dear little girl!” he said, seizing her in his arms.

But she tried to push him away in a sudden access of terror.

“Jim, go away; you must not touch me; you do not know. I have been nursing a child with diphtheria; you might catch the infection.”

"Yes, little girl, I do know," he answered, holding her closer than before. "Mrs. Bolden told me all about it, and I'll risk it or anything else on the face of the earth to hold you in my arms like his."

She gave a little sigh of content, and ceased to resist him.

"Tell me, Jim! How did you come?" she asked presently. "I have had no letter for four weeks, and I was afraid you were dead."

"I wrote as usual dear, and told you I was coming over; but, thinking you would be in town for the holidays, I sent the letters there, and Bob was away, so there was no one to send them on to you. See, here they are!" and he produced the letters from his pocket. "I got them when I went down yesterday to see you, and found out you were still here, so I caught the first train, and here I am."

"And, Jim, how long can you stay?"

"I've got a whole fortnight before my boat goes, so we must be married at once, and have our holidays together before we leave."

"Married, Jim!"

"Why, of course! Didn't I tell you all about it in those letters; of my new billet, I mean, and how I was coming over to make you my wife and take you back with me."

"Oh, Jim! And I so miserable only an hour ago. It all seemed so far off and unreal."

"But you are not unhappy now, little girl, are you?" he asked, bending over her.

She smiled up into his face through her tears, and shook her head, while the laughing jackass on the bough close by watched them with his bright eyes, and gave vent to a low chuckle.

HOW HE FOUND THE KING

SCHOOL broke up for the day with three cheers, and the children rushed out into the playground, tumbling over one another in their eagerness, and there formed into little groups to discuss the news of the moment, which was the announcement of a week's holiday in honour of the arrival in Melbourne of Their Royal Highnesses the Duke and Duchess of York to open the first Federal Parliament.

Holidays at all times are dear to the childish heart, and the children who attended the little State School at Dungalong, in Victoria, were no exception to the general rule, though few, if any, of them had more than a very vague idea who the Royal visitors were, and what brought them to Melbourne.

"It's the King, I tell yer," said Jimmie Parker to the group of which he was the centre. "The King of England, and he wears a gold crown on his 'ead."

"No it ain't, stupid," interrupted Bob Gardner, who was a year or so older, and had paid a visit to Melbourne once, on the strength of which he was always considered a great traveller by his companions and an authority on all matters connected with the capital of the State.

"What is 'e, then?" shouted Jimmie, defiantly, anxious to retain the position of instructor to the group of children, which he saw was slipping from him.

"He's the King's son, I tell yer," answered Bob, "and he don't wear no gold crown on 'is 'ead. I saw a picter of him onc't, and he 'ad no more crown than you 'av."

Jimmie almost involuntarily put up one hand to his head, not that he had any hope of finding a gold crown there, but just because he couldn't help it, and he had no reply to make.

"Might have left it off just to have his picture taken," suggested another.

Bob had a reply for this doubter also.

"Do you think if you had a gold crown and were going to have your photer took that you wouldn't wear it?" he asked, scathingly, and the other cowered under his sarcasm.

"It 'ud be terrible 'eavy always wearin' a gold crown, specially in the hot weather," ventured another.

"There ain't no hot weather in England, and that's where the King lives," answered Bob. "They have snow there, and it's always cold and wet."

"What's snow?" asked the smallest member of the group; but the question was disregarded that more important matters might be discussed.

"Anyhow, if he ain't the King now he will be some day, and then he'll wear a gold crown," said Jimmie Parker, who had been pondering the matter in his own mind while the others disputed.

"I wish I could see 'im when he comes," ventured one of the girls. "It will be awful grand, ever so much grander than the show or the circus. Mother says the Duchess will wear a dress with a train, oh, ever so long, and her fingers will be covered with rings."

"Who's the Duchess?" inquired several.

"She's his wife, and she'll be Queen when he's King," was the reply.

"Will she wear a crown, too?"

"I'm not sure. Anyway, she'll be awful grand, and drive in a carriage with eight horses."

"My stars! And we have only four for our three-furrow plough!" exclaimed a big boy, who had so far taken no part in the discussion. "She must be a terrible weight."

"'Tisn't that, stupid," answered his informant. "Queens always has eight horses to draw their carriages; it wouldn't be proper not to."

"Awful waste of horses, I call it" said the boy, moving off.

But this was not the general opinion. A gold crown and eight horses were by unanimous consent voted as indispensable for a king or even a king's son, and then the group began to break up.

"Oh, how I wish we could see him!" exclaimed one girl, in a burst of loyalty. "It would be too lovely for anything."

The others sighed, and echoed her wish, which they knew was impossible. Their parents were only struggling farmers in a rather poor district, and Melbourne was more than a hundred miles away. The railway journey was an expensive one, and in few, if any, of the homes was there money to spare save for the necessities of life. However, a week's holiday was not a thing to be despised, and so most of the children went home in high spirits to impart the news to their parents.

One of the last to leave the school playground was a small boy of some nine or ten years of age. He had not taken any part in the discussion, but stood on the outskirts of the group listening attentively to all that was said, with his hands thrust deep into the pockets of his knickerbockers, and his large, dark brown eyes wide

open. When the group had dispersed, he picked up his bag out of the dust and commenced to walk homewards across the paddocks. Evidently he was thinking deeply, for his pace got slower and slower, and once he stopped altogether, and dug the toe of one boot meditatively into the dry, brown grass. His eyes had a thoughtful, far-away look, and his face, though not handsome, was of a good type, and gave promise for the future.

Presently he was roused from his reverie by the sound of a voice, and looking up found that he was near home, and that his father was standing by the slip-rails and calling to him.

"Now then, Tom! Stir yourself and fetch up them cows. You're late this afternoon, and it's milking time."

"All right, Dad," answered the child, and, hanging his bag on the fence, he started off across one of the paddocks to bring up the cows to be milked.

There were twenty cows altogether, and to milk four of them was his share night and morning. Generally he was finished in good time, but this evening, with his head dug into the cow's side and the pail between his small knees, he fell to dreaming again, and was not finished until his father and sister had each done their share. Then he had to drive the cows back to another paddock for the night, feed the fowls, and do several other jobs before tea.

John Waters did not mean to be a hard man, but times were bad and his land poor, and so little Tom had to do his share of the farm work morning and evening, and attend the State School some two miles away during the day time. His mother was dead, and his elder sister, Polly, looked after the house as well as helping in the milking, and occasionally found time to give a little attention to Tom's clothes, but not before they sadly needed it.

His father and sister were nearly finished tea when he got back from the paddock, so he ate his meal in silence, pondering over the great subject with which his small mind was filled.

"Wake up, Tom; you are nearly asleep," said his sister presently.

He looked at her, but made no reply, and when he had finished his meal went out on the verandah, where his father was sitting smoking his evening pipe. Sitting down on the ground with his back to one of the verandah posts he gazed at his parent for some time in silence, and then said—

"Did you ever see a king, Dad?"

"Can't say as I ever did," answered John Waters, slowly, between puffs of his pipe.

"They are very grand and beautiful, I suppose, ain't they?"

"What are?" asked his father, who was studying the sky for signs of rain.

"Kings, Dad."

"I suppose they are," was the reply, given doubtfully. "Leastways they ought to be, with no hard work to do and plenty of money to spend."

"I wish I could see the King," ventured the child, after a pause.

"What good 'ud that do yer?" asked his father.

"I don't know, Dad, but I'd like to see him all the same."

"Well you ain't likely to," was the reply.

"But he's coming here, that is, to Melbourne."

"That ain't the King; it's only his son."

"But he'll be King some day," the child persisted.

"So he will sure enough, but Melbourne is a long sight off, and he ain't likely to come to Dungalong."

Tom sighed.

"I wish I could go to Melbourne to see him."

His father stared.

"Well, you can't, boy, so don't talk rot," and then, feeling he had been rather harsh, he went on in a different voice, "I've never seen the King, but I saw the Governor once."

"Did you really, Dad?" said the child, drawing up his knees and clasping his arms round them, while he gazed up at his father.

"I did that!" resumed John Waters, refilling his pipe.

"What was he like, Dad?"

"Mighty grand, I can tell you. He was driving out to the Melbourne Cup at Flemington, and had a soldier riding in front of him and four horses to draw his carriage."

"Kings have eight horses to draw their carriages," said Tom, with an air of authority.

"Have they, my boy? Well I should have thought four was enough for anybody."

"Does the Governor live in a palace like the King, Dad?"

"It's a mighty big house, I can tell you, anyway; but you'd better get to bed now, and mind you have them cows up on time in the morning."

And so the child went quietly off to his own little room to dream of kings and queens to his heart's content. And indeed for the next few days he thought of little else, and took small part in the games at school. At all times a thoughtful child, and somewhat reserved, this strange fancy now took complete possession of him, and he was never so happy as when alone weaving into his imagination of the coming Royal Visitors all he had ever heard or read of kings and queens.

And then one day he made a great discovery. In an old box he found a tattered, dog-eared copy of stories about the Knights of the Round Table, and thereafter every spare moment was given up to reading of King Arthur and his famous knights. When he was not reading of them he was thinking of what he had read, and it was no uncommon thing for him to fall a-dreaming during milking time, and so not be finished until long after his father and Polly had done their share. This called forth severe reproofs, but so long as he retained possession of his precious book other matters seemed of small consequence.

On Sundays there was little work done on the farm save milking—cows must be milked though the sky fall—and John Waters always insisted on Tom accompanying him to church. Polly had to stay at home to cook the dinner, which was always something of an event on Sunday.

Tom hated church, mostly because he was compelled to wear his best clothes, which always felt stiff and uncomfortable, but on the first Sunday after the discovery of the book he hated it worse than ever, for it was valuable time lost, when he might have been reading something so much more interesting than the service he was compelled to sit through, though he never listened to it. But this day something in the service fixed his attention suddenly when it had been far away from what was going on around him. It was the word "king" which recalled him from his dreams, and made him fix his attention on the clergyman. Fortunately, the sentence was repeated, or he would have missed it altogether.

"Thine eyes shall see the king in his beauty; they shall behold the land that is very far off," were the words, and the boy repeated them over to himself until he was

sure he would not forget them, for to his small, romantic soul they seemed a direct promise for the fulfilment of what he had been secretly longing for during the past few days.

"Thine eyes shall see the king," he kept repeating over and over to himself, until a stern glance from his father, accompanied by a whispered, "Stop that row," reminded him of where he was, and compelled him to whisper it over to himself so that no one could hear him.

Could it be that it was a message for him, he wondered. It seemed too good to be true. Melbourne, where the "King" was coming, was such a long way off, and he was such a little boy; and yet the words seemed to mean that, for they said, "the land that is very far off," and surely that must be Melbourne. It must be so, for the clergyman had read it out of the Bible, and he knew everything in that book was true.

"Thine eyes shall see the king," he kept repeating over and over to himself all the way back from church. His small mind could not quite grasp the fact that it was not the King who was coming to Melbourne, but only his son, who would be King some day. To Tom it was all the same. The King was coming, and he wanted to see him—to see "the king in his beauty," as the words in the Bible said—but how it was to be accomplished he did not know. Of one thing only he was certain. He must expect no help from his father or anyone else; they would try to prevent him if they knew, so he must depend on his own efforts entirely.

All that day he kept repeating the verse over and over to himself until he began to feel quite certain it was meant as a message for him. It even interfered with his enjoyment of the stories about King Arthur and his knights, for who could enjoy reading about a king when

there was a chance of seeing a real live one with his own eyes.

Long after he had gone to bed, and the house was quiet, he lay awake and gazed out of the window at the stars shining so quietly in the purple sky. They seemed to the dreamy, imaginative boy to promise him help in his enterprise, and before he went to sleep his mind was made up. He would go to Melbourne to see the "King"—for see him he must. Walk all the way if necessary, though he hoped to get a lift on the road in passing carts. It was nearly a hundred miles, he knew, but his heart was big within him, and he felt he could accomplish that and more with such a reward at the end of his journey. Of what was to come after he never for a moment thought. No considerations of future punishment would have deterred him, for he felt drawn towards this bold enterprise by some desire too strong to be resisted. But he must keep his secret to himself, for if his father or Polly so much as guessed at it they would take steps to prevent him going, and then whatever should he do?

And so for the next few days the child went about with his great secret resolve locked up in his breast. If ever for a moment the way to be travelled seemed long and lonely, the thought of the reward at the end of it gave him fresh heart, and the text which he now knew so well was a sure promise that his effort would be crowned with success.

Every day that week he put by some of his food from each meal to supply him on his journey, for he intended to start on the following Monday. He would have to sleep in the open air or in some empty shed, but the thought of that troubled him not at all, for in his short life he had been compelled to take his share of the rough with the smooth.

And so at last the day on which he had fixed to start on his great journey arrived, and after doing his usual morning's work, he set out as if as usual for school. But in his bag instead of books was the food he had saved up, and in his pocket the sum of one shilling and three-pence, the remains of half-a-crown his father had given him some months previously for finding a cow of value that had been lost. His heart beat high with hope, and already in his imagination he could see the streets and buildings of the great city which was to be the goal of his dreams.

He had only a vague idea of how long the journey would take him, and as to when the "King" was to arrive his ideas were vaguer still. He only knew that it was some time soon; so he set his face to the south, in which direction he knew Melbourne lay, and tramped sturdily along.

It was necessary that for the first part at least of his journey he avoid the main road, for he knew that when his absence was discovered there was more probability of him being captured and sent home if he stuck to the road than if he took less frequented ways; and so he struck off across the paddocks, and only returned to the road when night was approaching, and there was less probability of his recognition and capture. Whenever he approached a township it was also necessary to make a detour in order to avoid it. He knew there was a mounted constable in most townships who might be keeping his eyes open for small wandering boys.

All this, of course, made his journey much longer, and after five days' travelling, Melbourne still seemed a long way off. He had hoped to get a lift in passing carts, but now the fear that people might be on the look-out for him, and anxious to send him back home, made him shy of asking.

And so the small wayfarer tramped gamely on, though he was beginning to feel very tired and footsore. His boots, not very strong at the beginning of his journey, were now in holes, and his small, dusty toes peeped out more and more as the days went by, until he began to consider the advisability of discarding them altogether, and walking on his bare feet. Fortunately his supply of food held out, but he began to have less appetite for it than usual, and one morning, after spending the night in a deserted house close by the roadside, he awoke with a bad pain in his head, a thing he had never before experienced in all his short life. However, it got better after he had bathed his face in a cask of water that stood by the house, and that day he got a lift for several miles in a dray that was going in his direction. It did not travel much faster than he could have walked, but it gave his small, tired feet a rest, for which he was very thankful.

"What day is it?" he asked the man when their roads lay apart.

"Saturday," was the answer, which somewhat startled Tom. He had calculated on reaching Melbourne by the evening of that day, but still the great city seemed as far off as ever.

But no thought of giving up his journey and returning home occurred to him. With a determination wonderful in so young a child he plodded on, though the way seemed very long, and his body began to ache all over. The thought of the great reward at the end of his journey—that he should "see the King"—gave him strength, and the text from the Bible, which he kept on repeating over and over to himself, seemed to promise him success in his enterprise.

"Thine eyes shall see the King in his beauty: they

shall behold the land that is very far off,'” he murmured. “The King in his beauty.” It must be true, surely it must be true; but the land was very far off, and he was getting so tired.

That night he was compelled to sleep in the open air, and to add to his troubles it began to rain. In the morning he was cold and wet, and every joint in his small body was stiff. After a very small breakfast he started off again, and gradually the stiffness wore off; but his head began to ache again worse than before, and he longed to lie down and rest. But his journey must be accomplished, no matter how tired and sick he might feel. It would never do to go back now without having seen the “King” after coming all this way.

He sat down under some trees to eat his midday meal. But he had little appetite for it, and then even as he felt he must get up and plod on again he fell asleep. When he awoke it was evening, and he could hear a church bell ringing in a township about half a mile away. It was too late to go on, so he waited until the bell stopped, and then crept close enough to hear the people in church singing. When the service was over he made a bed with some straw in an outhouse in the church grounds, and on it passed a restless night.

The next few days were like a sick dream to him, in which he seemed to be wandering for ever along endless hot, dusty roads which hurt his feet with their sharp stones. He could remember bathing once in cool, clear water, but he was ignorant of all time, save that it was sometimes day and sometimes night. In his brain, along with many other sick fancies, the words, “Thine eyes shall see the King,” were always repeating themselves over and over and over again. That was his one idea sleeping and waking, well and ill, to see the “King.”

"Oh, I must see him," he kept murmuring to himself ;
"I must, I must."

And then one morning he seemed to wake up, and found himself gazing at a milestone, which said, "Melbourne, ten miles."

His heart gave a great leap within him, for his journey was at last nearly over, and he would see the "King."

But those last ten miles seemed the longest ones of all to the poor sick, tired child, and when at last he had passed through the suburbs, and arrived in the city itself, it was afternoon.

Now that the journey was over, and he was at the desired place, the last remnant of his strength seemed to depart, and he could scarcely drag his weary little body along. The noise and traffic confused and frightened him, but he was too sick to take more than the very faintest interest in the huge buildings and all the other wonders of the great city he had so longed to behold. If he could only see the "King," "the King in his beauty," and then lie down and rest, for he felt so very, very tired.

But he did not know where to go, the city seemed such a huge place, there were so many people walking about, and they all seemed so busy, that he stood at a corner in perplexity. The streets were gay with flags and banners ; tall poles of different colours stretched away in an endless perspective, and here and there a stately arch spanned the street from side to side. It all seemed very grand and wonderful to the poor, little, sick country boy who had travelled so far to see it. But where was the "King?" It was the "King" he had come to see, and now that he had at last arrived he did not know where to find him.

He was so tired and sick that a few tears forced their

way from his eyes in spite of him, and rolled down his face, leaving grimy marks on his dust-stained cheeks. Oh! he must see the "King," and so wiping away the tears with the sleeve of his now ragged coat, he addressed a man passing by.

"If you please, where can I see the King?" he asked.

"The King, my boy!" said the man, pausing in surprise, and gazing down at his small questioner. "The King is a long way off—in England. I am afraid you have not much chance of seeing him."

"Oh! but, please, he was to come to Melbourne, I know, and I've walked all the way from Dungalong to see him."

"Ah! you mean the Duke of York, my boy; the King's son, eh?"

"It's all the same, please, isn't it? He will be King some day. Oh, tell me where I can see him!"

There was such a pitiful note in the child's voice that the man felt sorry for him.

"I am afraid you are too late, my poor boy. The King's son left for Sydney this morning, and there is no chance of your seeing him now. How far did you say you had come?"

But there was no reply from Tom. The bitter disappointment combined with his long journey and sickness, only to end in defeat of all his most cherished hopes, had proved too much for him, and he lay a little inanimate heap at his questioner's feet.

"He has been very restless all day, doctor," said the nurse, bending over her small patient, in one of the wards of the Children's Hospital. "He keeps talking about the King, and says he wants to see him."

The doctor nodded gravely, for he had heard of the

child's story from the man who had picked him up and brought him to the hospital.

"Poor little chap!" he said. "I wish we knew his name."

Outside the great city was being dismantled of its holiday dress put on to welcome the "King," and the roar of its busy life came faintly up and in through the window; but it did not reach the ears of the boy lying there, who had travelled so far only to be disappointed after all his efforts.

But not for long was the disappointment to last, for that evening Tom set out on another and longer journey, and before morning he had reached the land that is very far off, and found the King.

FOR HIS FRIEND'S SAKE

THE train crawled slowly into the station as if tired of its journey across the bare, sun-dried plains, and pulled up at the rough platform, where nearly half of the inhabitants of the little township of Mulgong, situated in western New South Wales, were awaiting it.

It was one of the most important daily events this arrival of the train, and for long before its coming men would begin to appear in twos and threes, those that rode or drove fixing up their horses to the railway fence—perhaps with a nose bag, perhaps not; it depended upon the price of feed—and then seeking the shade of the station verandah if it were hot, and it nearly always was hot at Mulgong, where they sat on anything available for a seat, or leaned up against posts, as the fancy took them, and talked slowly together about local events or the last loan the Government was floating to settle people on the land, while the tobacco smoke made a blue-grey haze in the still air.

And as the train was never on time, there was plenty of opportunity for conversation. Now and then a new arrival in the district, learning this failing on the part of the train, would commence by timing his arrival at the station somewhere about three-quarters of an hour after the train was due. Then he would not have long to wait, perhaps half an hour at most. But the older inhabitants

looked upon such a proceeding with disfavour. Because the train had never yet been on time was no reason why it should not some day arrive punctually, or even a minute or two in advance; then if you had trusted to its usual habits you would miss the train altogether.

This was how the population of Mulgong reasoned amongst themselves. Not that anything very serious would have happened if one day no one had been there to meet the train. It would, doubtless, have stopped as usual, put off the mail bags and any stray parcel that the guard thought he would like to get rid of, and then, there being no one for the engine-driver to talk to, would have resumed its slow, tired way towards its destination in the far west, somewhere out at the back of beyond.

But in the memory of man this had never happened, and in a little while the new-comer would gradually drop into the ways of the district, and arrive at the station in good time to smoke a couple of pipes before the event of the day took place.

Why it was such an event it would have been difficult to say. Few passengers ever alighted to do more than stretch their legs, and the mail was never a large one. Perhaps it was some dim feeling that those two lines of shining rails stretching away into the dim distance connected them with the great world outside. But whatever it may have been, it was never expressed in words, and no one ever thought of asking.

On this particular day the train was later than usual. Perhaps it was the heat, or the flies, or, more likely still, a plague of grasshoppers on the rails. But the group of waiters under the shade of the verandah were not impatient, and now and then one would jerk his head slowly or perhaps point with the stem of his pipe in the direction of a man who, in spite of the heat, was striding im-

patiently up and down the rough platform or straining his eyes in search of the delayed train.

He was dressed in riding trousers and boots, flannel shirt and coat, and a large hat. The coat was alone sufficient to draw attention to him, for that garment was seldom worn in Mulgong except on festive occasions. But there were other differences besides that marked him out from amongst the waiters on the platform. He was tall and bronzed like they, and yet there was that unnameable something differentiating him from the crowd of men, and which they themselves would have expressed by saying he was a toff.

When the train at last arrived, he scanned with eager eyes the few passengers who alighted, and then, marking his man, stepped quickly forward through the crowd, and addressed him.

"Mr. Pemberton, I believe! You are for Burthoona?"

The man addressed turned sharply at the sound of the voice, and gazed at his interrogator for a moment.

"My God!" he exclaimed. "Jack Carrington! To think of meeting you here! Why, man, we all thought you must be dead. What on earth are you doing in this God-forsaken place?"

The two men were both tall, and as they gazed at one another for a moment without speaking their eyes were on a level. Then—

"Jack Carrington it is, sure enough," said the first. "But ask no questions until we get out of this place. I came in to meet you on purpose to answer questions, so your curiosity will be satisfied. Come along. I have horses waiting, for I thought you would sooner ride than drive."

"What about my traps?"

"Are these they? There's a man here from the sta-

tion with a cart. He will take them for us. Are you ready? Then come along."

With Carrington leading, they crossed the station yard to the fence, where a couple of horses were tied up in the shade of the goods shed.

"The bay is for you," he said. "She is well up to your weight, though you are heavier than you used to be" (he paused, and then continued) "three years ago, though I was just thinking it must be a hundred."

Pemberton untied his horse, and mounted in silence. The surprised, almost dazed look that had come into his face at sight of the man waiting for him had not left it yet, and they were out of the station yard and a quarter of a mile along the road before either spoke; then it was Carrington—

"You may as well begin now," he said, with a shade of bitterness in his tone.

"Begin what?" asked his companion.

"Your questions. You must have many to ask—Why I am here? what am I doing? and a hundred others."

"I won't ask them at all if you would sooner I did not, old man," answered Pemberton, looking away from his companion, and over the flat, brown paddocks between which they were passing.

"Then I must tell you without," was the reply, "seeing I came in for that especial purpose, for it is not one of my usual duties to meet the guests for the homestead."

There was still the same shade of bitterness in his voice, and the other noticed it.

"Old man," he said, "you need tell me nothing. Perhaps I can guess how it is, and you can trust me, and go on just the same as if I were not here."

"I'm a fool, Pemberton; but the sight of you brings to mind things I have been trying to forget since—since

I came here. I see now it was no use. I am the same man still, with the same old hide-bound traditions, and the knowledge haunts me."

The other said nothing; he judged it wiser not to; only perhaps he drew his horse a little closer to his companion's. They were going very slowly, for it was too hot to ride fast.

"All men are supposed to be equal out here," Carrington went on, presently. "I suppose it is their own fault if they are not; but the old ways of thought stick to me still, and the tutor of to-day sometimes forgets he is not the man he used to be."

"Are you a tutor, then? I remember you were always a dab at the classics, and took your degree when I went down without one."

"True enough; but they know nothing of my degree here. In fact, they know nothing at all about me, except that I have the requisite knowledge to teach a boy of twelve, who would be much better at school. It was only this morning that I heard you were expected, and as there was no time for me to go away for a holiday, and so avoid meeting you altogether, I thought the next best thing was to come in and meet you here, lest you received too great a surprise when others were by."

"I understand, old man. It will be all right."

"You will be constantly seeing me as long as you stay at Burthoona, and I must ask you to forget we have ever met before to-day. It will be no wrong to my employers"—and he laughed bitterly—"for you to do this, and if Mr. and Mrs. Chauncey knew all we know I should not care to remain here even if they would have me."

"But surely they would not punish you for what was not your fault."

Carrington laughed.

"After all, Pemberton, we have much the same old prejudices in Australia as you have in England, and one of them is against a man who has been in gaol."

"Even when he was innocent?"

"How do you know I was innocent?"

"My dear fellow! How do I know!"

"Well, then, even when he was innocent."

They rode on in silence for some time, each man busy with his own thoughts. But presently Carrington began to speak again, not looking at his companion, but straight ahead between his horse's ears.

"I want you to thoroughly understand the position in which you find me," he said, "and to do that it is necessary to go back some time—three years, in fact. I was then a young man of twenty-seven, living with my uncle, whose heir I was to be. You remember the life we led, beyond our means—beyond mine, at least. But it was a clean life at any rate. No one can throw that up against me. Then one day it suddenly came to an end. I was arrested for forging my uncle's name, and the end if it was a year's imprisonment. A short sentence, people said, but it was a lifetime to me. I am serving that sentence yet, Pemberton, and it will last me the rest of my life."

He paused, and the other spoke:

"You could go back now," he said. "None of your friends believed you guilty. Even your uncle believed in you at the last, and left you his money."

"What do you mean, man?" demanded Carrington, flashing round towards his companion. "Is the old man dead, then?"

"Surely! I thought you had known. He died nearly a year ago, and left you everything."

"Poor old chap!" and there was something like a sob in Carrington's voice as he spoke.

"Surely you will go back now you know this?" the other went on, almost persuasively. "Your place awaits you, and the trouble is quite forgotten even by those, if there were any, who believed you guilty."

"I can't go back, Pemberton, unless the guilty man is discovered, and my name cleared. Even out here, where not a soul knows me or my story, I am haunted by the disgrace that clings to me—the prison taint. It would be ten thousand times worse at home. No! I must stay here, though it is a living death."

"You are wrong," broke in the other. "There are reasons that make it your duty to go back. What of Miss Remington?"

"She will have consoled herself by this time," and again Carrington laughed a bitter, mirthless laugh.

"She has done nothing of the sort, man. She is waiting for you to go back and ask her to marry you. I am sure of it. Why else should she remain unmarried? It is not for want of offers."

"I couldn't do it, Pemberton," and he groaned. "How could I offer my disgraced name to a girl like Catherine Remington? Man, she deserves something better than a convict."

"But you will at least make use of your money, and give up this confounded tutorship?"

"I don't know; I must think it over," was the reply. "Directly I was released I came out here, not communicating with anyone. It is better people should think me dead."

"They do think so, old man. I got a shock when you put your hand on my shoulder and spoke to me."

"Well, let them continue to think it. You must keep my secret, Pemberton, for the old times' sake. That is why I came in to meet you to-day. You understand the position now."

"We must talk it over again," Pemberton answered. He seemed strangely anxious, but his companion did not notice it.

"Tell me," asked Carrington, presently, "what brings you to an out-of-the way place like Burthoona?"

"Can't you guess?"

"I'm afraid not."

"And yet you have lived for months in the same house with Miss Chauncey!"

Pemberton's manner had completely altered in the last few minutes, and he was now gay and smiling.

"You don't mean to say——"

"But I do, Carrington, old man," he interrupted, with a laugh.

"That you are engaged?"

"Not yet, but I hope to be before I leave here."

"Then you are a lucky man. She is the best girl I ever met."

"Not excepting Miss Remington?" queried Pemberton.

"Let us leave her out of the question," answered Carrington, gravely. "Meanwhile let me congratulate you and wish you the best of luck. Where did you meet her?"

"In Sydney, three months ago."

"Ah, yes! She and her mother went down for a change. But there is the homestead, and you can see them on the verandah waiting for you."

They quickened the pace of their horses, and in another five minutes Pemberton was being welcomed by his host and hostess and their daughter in the shade of a broad, cool verandah; but Carrington had slipped away and disappeared inside the house.

The next few weeks passed very pleasantly for Jim Pemberton, and for once at least the course of true love seemed to be running smoothly enough. The quiet life

of the station suited him well, at any rate for a time, and with such a companion as Gladys Chauncey on his daily rides, the rather uninteresting country, bare and scorched at the end of a long, hot summer, became a veritable garden, for love transforms everything, and he was very much in love. Nevertheless he had moments of depression, when some problem that would not be solved persisted in presenting itself; and these moments always came after he had been with his old friend Jack Carrington, now tutor to young Dick Chauncey.

Pemberton had hoped for many opportunities to talk over old times with his friend, and perhaps persuade him to give up the life he was living and return to England, there to resume his place in society and enjoy the fortune that had been left him. But perhaps Carrington suspected this intention on the part of his friend. Anyway, he most certainly avoided him, and gave him no chance of returning to the subject they had discussed on their ride from the station.

At first Pemberton had laughed at the idea that his friend was avoiding him, but gradually he was forced to realise that such was the case; and then it was that the worried look came into his face, and he pondered much alone on some secret problem. He longed much to speak out and ask Gladys for her advice on the matter. But at present this was impossible, for he had promised Carrington to keep his story a secret.

And Jack Carrington. It was not without a bitter pang that he forced himself to avoid his friend, for he did avoid him. He feared his arguments; they seemed so reasonable, and his heart longed to accept and act upon them. But ever the thought that he was a disgraced man would rise up to prevent him returning to England to claim the happiness Pemberton said was awaiting him.

So he tried to forget the matter, and deliberately avoided his friend, lest in a moment of weakness he should consent to do that which he deemed inconsistent with his honour.

And so several weeks passed by, and the two friends, though living in the same house, saw very little of one another, until late one evening, when Carrington was sitting smoking in his own room—he had avoided the verandah lately—there came a knock at the door, and without waiting for an answer, Pemberton entered.

It was his first visit to this room, for he had disliked appearing to force his company on a man who avoided him; but this evening he had important news to tell which would not wait.

"Carrington, old man," he began, seeing an involuntary frown on his friend's face, "you must forgive me intruding on you here to-night, but there are two things I must tell you."

The other nodded, and dragged a chair forward, into which Pemberton dropped, somewhat puzzled how to begin.

"Jack, old man, congratulate me!" he burst out at last. "I'm the luckiest beggar in the world. Gladys Chauncey has promised to become my wife."

"I'm very glad, Jim," answered Carrington, and his voice trembled a little as he spoke. "You have got one of the best girls in the world; but be good to her, or you will have me to reckon with. He got up and went to the window, and then with his back towards his friend, continued, "She helped me more than I can tell you when first I came up here. Some woman's intuition seemed to guide her, though she knew nothing about me."

He spoke with deep feeling, scarcely concealed, and

then fell silent, gazing out of the window into the dark, while the other wondered how he was to tell his second piece of news.

Presently he began—

“Gladys and I rode over to Moonamble to-day, Jack.”

“So I heard,” answered the man at the window, without turning round.

“There were visitors there from Sydney.”

“There generally are. If you want society you ought to go there on a visit, Pemberton.”

“Thanks, old man, but I’m very comfortable where I am. I knew one of the girls though.”

“Ah!” The figure at the window seemed scarcely to be listening.

“Yes, and so do you, Jack.”

“I know all the manager’s daughters slightly.”

“But this was not one of the manager’s daughters.”

“Who was it then?” carelessly.

“Jack, old man, it was Catherine Remington.”

The figure at the window turned, and in a moment Carington was standing over his friend with his hands clenched in an endeavour to control his excitement.

“By God, Pemberton!” he gasped, his voice trembling with the intensity of his passion. “If you did this thing—if you brought Catherine out here to meet me——”

But Pemberton had sprung to his feet, and interrupted him.

“What the devil do you mean, Jack? You are mad! How could I have brought Miss Remington out to meet you when a month ago I did not know you were here—thought you dead, in fact. Figure it to yourself, man, and you will see it is impossible. I was as much surprised to meet her at Moonamble to-day as I was to see you at that confounded railway station three weeks ago.”

Carrington listened, and his sudden, fierce passion died down at the sound of his friend's words.

"You are right," he said, when the other had finished. "I was mad. Of course, you could have had nothing to do with bringing her out. Who is with her?"

"Her brother."

"Are they going to stay there long?"

"No. They are leaving Moonamble in a few days."

Carrington was back again at the window, gazing out of it as before, while Pemberton watched him from the other side of the room.

"You won't avoid her, Jack?" he said, presently, in a hesitating way.

"We are scarcely likely to meet if she leaves in a few days. You said nothing about me, of course."

"But when they leave Moonamble they are coming here to stay; Mrs. Chauncey has asked them."

Carrington turned sharply and looked at his friend.

"I swear I had nothing to do with this either, Jack!" cried Pemberton. "But I think you will be a fool, and worse, to avoid her. She loves you I am certain, and if you did not care to live at home you could settle down in Sydney or Melbourne. Think it over, old man, now that fate has given you this chance," he went on, persuasively.

Carrington was sitting now with his head resting in his hands. For a time he was silent, as if thinking the matter over, and when he spoke, it was very slowly.

"I can't do it, Pemberton. I can't ask Catherine Remington to marry me until I can prove to her that some other man committed the crime for which I was punished."

"If you could prove it to her, and yet could not make it public to all the world, would that satisfy your

scruples?" asked the other, after a pause, during which he had been thinking deeply.

"What's the good of asking such a question?"

"It is not much trouble to answer it."

"Well, then, supposing such a thing were to happen, and Catherine were willing to live out here, I should ask her to marry me. If she knew I was innocent the world can go hang. But it is folly to talk of such a thing."

"True enough," answered Pemberton, rising suddenly. "I'll say good-night now, old man, for I'm dead beat;" and so the two men parted, but Carrington sat smoking alone for an hour after with a girl's picture in his hand.

Pemberton had hoped to be able to have another talk with his friend before Miss Remington arrived at Burthoona for her promised visit. But he was disappointed. It would have been easy enough to make opportunities had he been at liberty to disclose their friendship, but that was against the tutor's express wish. And so on the afternoon, when Catherine and her brother arrived at the station homestead, he had no idea what attitude Carrington intended to adopt towards the girl. True he had speculated much on the matter, but his imaginings had not hit the mark.

They would meet for the first time at the dinner table, he decided, and he pitied the girl, and ardently wished he could give her a word of warning. But it was well he did not do so, for when the dinner hour arrived the tutor did not put in an appearance. No one seemed surprised, and as Mrs. Chauncey made no remark, Pemberton sat through the meal impatient to find out what had become of his friend.

"Where is Mr. Carrington?" he asked Dick as soon as he could get him alone.

"Oh, the mater has given me a holiday, and he has

gone off alone somewhere," the boy answered readily enough, but this was all he knew.

It was enough, however, for Pemberton. He might have guessed it, he told himself. Jack had gone away on purpose to avoid the girl, and would probably not return until she had left the station. He felt disgusted that he had not foreseen this move on his friend's part and tried to prevent it; for he was very anxious to bring the two together and try to patch up Jack's life, which seemed in imminent danger of becoming a wreck.

For two days he tried to find out where Carrington had gone to, but without success. Neither Mrs. Chauncey nor Gladys knew, and he began to fear that all his efforts would be in vain.

On the third evening he was sitting in the drawing-room after dinner, where the party were gathered, and Miss Remington was singing to them. There had been a heavy storm during the day, and the air outside was colder than usual, which accounted for them sitting inside rather than on the verandah, which was the usual custom. Gazing through the open window into the dark outside while he listened to the song, Pemberton became aware of a man standing in the garden listening too, and gazing at the singer. There was a low, open window behind him also, and, with a glance of apology towards his hostess, he rose, and, stepping softly through it, approached the man from behind.

The tutor, for it was he, was so absorbed in his occupation that he neither saw nor heard the other until the song was finished, and Pemberton spoke.

"So you have returned, old man," he said. "You are only just in time; she leaves for Sydney the day after to-morrow."

Carrington turned with a start, and seeing whom it was, began to walk rapidly down the garden away from

the house. But the other was not going to be easily shaken off. This was his last chance to put matters right, and he meant to use it for all he was worth.

Neither spoke until they reached a gate leading into the paddocks outside, then Carrington turned, as if at bay, and began—

“What do you want?” he asked, savagely. “Can’t you see I wish to be alone? Leave me.”

“Not until you have told me what you intend doing and listened to what I am going to say. Are you going to ask Miss Remington to be your wife?”

“No!”

“Jack you are a fool. You are wrecking your life.”

“It was wrecked three years ago,” bitterly.

“You can mend it now if you will.”

“Not with honour.”

“That is a matter of opinion.”

“Exactly! Have you any more to say?”

“Only this,” answered Pemberton, and his voice had a curious ring in it as he spoke, “that if you persist in spoiling your own life you spoil mine too; and, what is more, that of the girl I am engaged to marry, and whom you say you respect and like greatly.”

“What on earth do you mean? How can that be?”

“It is very simple. You will not marry the girl you love because you cannot prove to her that you did not commit a crime for which you were punished. She does not want proof, for she is sure of your innocence already. But if you must have it I can give it to you.”

“My God, Pemberton! You are joking.”

“I am not.”

“You know who forged my uncle’s name?”

“I do.”

“Then why in heaven’s name didn’t you tell long ago?”

"Because I was sorry for him, and didn't want him to be punished."

"You didn't think of me," with a bitter laugh.

"I did not then, but I do now."

"Then who did it?"

"I did!"

"You! You! My friend!" Carrington gasped, and leaning up against the gate, he laughed, while Pemberton watched him with a curious look in his eyes.

Presently he stopped laughing, and said—

"Tell me about it."

"There is not much to tell," was the reply. "I was pressed for money, and in a moment of madness signed your uncle's name to a bill. Then when you were arrested I made sure he would not prosecute you, and when that hope went my courage went too. It was not until I saw you here that I realised what your punishment was."

"And now?"

"Now I would do anything I could to repair the wrong you have suffered."

Carrington made no reply; he was thinking deeply. The shock of learning that his friend had betrayed him was a sickening one; but along with it came many other thoughts.

"Are you willing to make this public?" he asked, after a long pause.

"If you force me to do so, yes; not otherwise."

"I see," with a bitter laugh. "Your repentance is but a poor thing after all."

There came a sudden, swift movement from Pemberton, then in a moment he had regained control of himself.

"Understand me!" he said, and his voice trembled with passion. "It is not of myself I am thinking, but of the girl who has promised to become my wife."

"Ah!" from Carrington. This aspect of the affair had not occurred to him before. If he forced Pemberton to clear his name it meant injuring Gladys, perhaps breaking her heart. Could he do that? He knew he could not, and Pemberton knew it too, and was taking advantage of it. But, then, should he not think of Catherine? Did he not owe a greater duty to her than to anyone else? Should he not try by every means in his power to clear his name for her sake?

"You make it very hard for me," he said presently. "How can I force you to confess?"

"It is very simple," returned the other.

"How?"

"By going on as you are going. By refusing the good life has to offer you because you cannot have everything you want."

"I don't understand you."

"See here, Carrington! I cannot see you ruining your life as you are doing. Selfish as I am I could not stand that. You can force me to confess by refusing to ask Catherine Remington to be your wife and persisting in burying yourself out here; or you can ask her to marry you and make your people happy."

"And if I refuse?"

"I shall go to England and give myself up to clear your name."

"But Gladys——"

"Gladys will rejoice that she has escaped marrying a forger."

"But she loves you! No, no, Pemberton, I can't do that. Poor child, she loves you, and it would break her heart."

"There is the alternative."

Yes, there was the alternative. To ask the girl he

loved to marry him, and then to settle down in Melbourne or Sydney, and take the good the gods provided. No unenviable lot, surely. With Catherine he could be happy anywhere, and he could not be the means of depriving this other girl of her lover, even for her sake. It was an extraordinary position, and he paced up and down in an endeavour to decide, while Pemberton watched him with a peculiar look on his face.

At last he stopped and spoke.

"You must let me tell Catherine the truth," he said. "I can't ruin your life or Gladys' by forcing you to confess, though you deserve no mercy at my hands. Tonight I must tell her, and if she consents you will hear no more of it from me."

Pemberton's face paled, and when he spoke it was in a hoarse, forced voice.

"Very well, you can tell her."

"Then send her to me now, for I cannot go inside. My God, I can wait no longer. Tell her I am here, here, waiting for her. If she comes——"

But Pemberton was walking towards the house with bent head. At the door Gladys met him.

"Have you seen him?" she asked.

"I have told him," he said. "He consents. Break it to Catherine, darling; he is waiting for her in the garden, and then come to me."

When she had disappeared, he sank down on a verandah chair and groaned.

"My God, it was hard!" he said. "To lose one's friend, to lose his respect, and all to save him from himself. Now he must always think me a mean hound to let him suffer for a crime which he thinks I committed. But it was the only way. God, if I could only lay my hands on the man who committed that forgery!"

Gladys was beside him again, her cool, soft hands holding his big, brown ones.

"Does he hate you very much, dear?" she asked.

"He despises me, darling, and that's worse."

"Oh, Jim!" she cried. "You are so brave to do such a thing for a friend. But suppose he had refused?"

"We won't think of that, dear," he answered.

"But, Jim, some day we will be able to tell him, and then he will know what a friend he had in you."

"Let us hope so," he said, taking her into his arms.

"And meanwhile he has Catherine."

"And Jim," she whispered shyly, "we have one another."

THE book is completed,
And closed, like the day;
And the hand that has written it
Lays it away.

Dim grow its fancies,
Forgotten they lie;
Like coals in the ashes,
They darken and die.

Song sinks into silence,
The story is told,
The windows are darkened,
The hearthstone is cold.

Darker and darker
The black shadows fall;
Sleep and oblivion
Reign over all!—(Longfellow.)



UC SOUTHERN REGIONAL LIBRARY FACILITY



A 000 135 228 5

